

INFLUENCE OF A SCHOOL TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS  
TO EDUCATE STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES IN  
GENERAL EDUCATION SETTINGS



By

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Supporting students with severe disabilities in inclusive general education settings requires that a collaborative support system be created. Although descriptions of collaborative support systems exist in the literature, descriptions are not available of the reform efforts that create these systems. However, school reform literature provides insights that can help schools develop a collaborative support system. The literature describes reform as the result of interaction among professionals. In schools that have successfully reformed, specific structures have been constructed to support this collaboration. These forums for discussion are the center of collaboration and school reform. A discussion forum is a setting in which a group of individuals that represent each constituency in a school community meets, with the support of the entire community, to plan, implement, and assess activities related to reform. One example of a discussion forum is a school task force.

This qualitative study examined the initial operating year of one school task force as the school community worked to create a collaborative support system. The study occurred in an elementary school in rural central Florida. The researcher used participant observation and 26 semi-structured interviews to investigate the development of the school task force.

The researcher identified four key contextual variables created within the school task force that support ongoing reform. These variables include ongoing professional dialogue, development of professional relationships, facilitative leadership, the creation of a common vision of teaching and learning, and shared decision making. The creation of the key contextual variables was influenced by a variety of conditions both internal and external to the school task force. Once the key contextual variables were in place, the school task force was able to take steps toward two changes in school practice that had the potential to affect significantly the education of children with severe disabilities.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

### Introduction

Children adopt attitudes and understandings of diversity at an early age (Minow, 1990). These attitudes and understandings develop based on interactions they have with people, and the degree to which those people represent diverse perspectives. To promote positive attitudes toward diversity in our society, it is necessary to bring children from diverse backgrounds together to learn, work, and play together. One aspect of diversity for which children should develop understanding is disability. Children can develop positive attitudes about and relationships with people who have disabilities through interactions that occur during common experiences and activities.

Students with and without disabilities who have been educated together have had common experiences. These common experiences become a foundation upon which relationships can be built. The inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings allows students with and without disabilities to have common experiences that form the foundation for relationships between students with disabilities and their peers (i.e., chronologically same-aged children who do not have disabilities). In addition to increasing knowledge about diversity, these common experiences assist all students, as they become adults, assume a variety of roles (e.g., employers, teachers, neighbors, doctors, family members) in which they will interact and may even have influence on the lives of individuals with disabilities (Minow, 1990).

Students with severe disabilities must have access to the necessary education and support that will allow them to live, work, and recreate in a heterogeneous adult society (Sontag & Haring, 1996). Stated simply, the goal of education is that students with severe disabilities will become fully participating members of society. This goal cannot be accomplished unless students with severe disabilities are educated with their peers. For students with severe disabilities to develop and sustain relationships in their communities, students with severe disabilities and their peers must form connections with each other early in life ((Brown, Long, Udvari-Solner, Davis, VanDeventer, Ahlgren, Johnson, Gruenewald, & Jorgensen, 1989). The only way to help students with severe disabilities form these connections is to teach them with their peers in general education settings (Lipsky & Gartner, 1995; Logan, Bakeman, & Keefe, 1997). General education settings are the primary places where students with severe disabilities can practice the social and communication skills necessary for survival and where their non-disabled peers can learn to accept them and be aware of their needs (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Staub, Spaulding, Peck, Galluci, & Schwartz, 1996).

It is well documented that inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings with their same-age peers results in positive benefits for both peers and students with severe disabilities (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Giangreco et al., 1989; Meyer, Peck, & Brown, 1991; Snell, 1993; Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Villa & Thousand, 1995). First, peers gain social skills by interacting with students who are different from themselves (Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994; Kishi & Meyer, 1994). They gain an understanding of and appreciation for different talents and characteristics of people (Voeltz, 1982). Peers learn the importance of patience, as they work and play with a



student who needs additional time to complete tasks. Peers have opportunities to improve their problem-solving skills as they help students with severe disabilities participate in class activities (Bernabe & Block, 1994). Beyond the benefits gained by interacting with students with severe disabilities, peers also benefit from adaptations and modifications that are made to accommodate a student with severe disabilities in general education, particularly those students who are at risk for school failure. For example, at risk students can benefit from alternative modes of instruction, increased cues and prompts, or alternative means of assessment that are common modifications used for students with severe disabilities (Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995).

The benefits that peers receive from including students with severe disabilities in general education settings are clear. To have a full understanding of the benefits for students with severe disabilities, however, it is first necessary to understand the learning characteristics of students with severe disabilities and the goal of education for them.

#### Characteristics of Students with Severe Disabilities

Students with severe disabilities frequently possess a common set of learning characteristics that impact how teachers should develop curriculum and implement instruction. For instance, students with severe disabilities learn more slowly than other students, and thus learn less than other students over a comparable period of time. Additionally, these students show difficulties (a) putting together components of an activity; (b) maintaining knowledge or skills that they do not use on a regular basis; and (c) generalizing skills, activities, or social expectations across settings, persons, or materials (Jorgenson, 1997; Ryndak & Alper, 1996; Westling & Fox, 1995).

Due to their difficulties, it is imperative that the curriculum centers around the application of skills most important to their daily life in naturally occurring activities (Hunt & Farron-Davis, 1992; Stokes & Baer, 1977). For example, teaching a student with severe disabilities to write his name will be more successful if he practices writing his name when he needs to use it, rather than practicing in isolation each letter in his name (e.g., writing Mark in lieu of writing MMM, aaa, etc.), or writing his name repeatedly out of context. Students with severe disabilities should also be taught skills in natural settings. Instruction should be embedded within natural daily routines, the contexts in which the skills will ultimately be required (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994). For example, students must learn social skills in general education settings with their same age peers. If they learn these skills in an isolated pull-out speech therapy session or a special education classroom with other students who have identical communication problems, they most likely will not be able to generalize these skills and will need to relearn appropriate social skills with non-disabled peers in other settings (Janney & Snell, 1996).

The characteristics of students with severe disabilities also often indicate the need for curriculum and instruction that are different from their peers. The need for different curriculum and instruction may at first suggest an alternate educational setting, but as the characteristics of students with severe disabilities and their goals for education are considered, the importance of providing education in inclusive general education settings becomes clear.

### Support for Students with Severe Disabilities Included in General Education

Providing an appropriate education for students with severe disabilities in inclusive general education settings requires tremendous support for both students and teachers. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 1997), educational supports are those services required for a student to benefit from special education. There are many types of educational supports for students with severe disabilities within general education settings, including the expertise of related service providers (e.g., physical therapist, speech therapist), nursing supports, paraprofessional support, positive behavioral supports, assistive technology, and peer support. These educational supports are crucial to ensure that the students receive educational benefit from participating in activities within general education settings.

### Student Teams

Student teams are common vehicles for determining what supports would be effective for a student and for delivering supports in educational settings (Giangreco et al., 1991). Student teams consist of all individuals who support a student in his/her educational environment. Frequently, a student team might include a general education teacher, special education teacher, speech therapist, physical therapist, family members, and the student. Together, members of a student team collaboratively plan, implement, and assess the student's educational program, thus sharing both their expertise and responsibility for the student's progress toward IEP objectives (Ferguson, Meyer, Jeanchild, & Zingo 1992; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Student team members may deliver support directly to the student or indirectly through training and consultation for classroom staff (i.e., teacher, paraprofessional).

Although student teams have been effective in supporting students with severe disabilities, they can be inefficient. Because student teams are built around individual students, they usually are redesigned annually as students transition to the next grade level. In this scenario, newly configured teams must form collaborative relationships and get to know the student each time he/she progresses from one grade level to the next. Because often these student teams are composed of as many as 8 to 12 people, the development of these groups into supportive teams can take several months. Team development this lengthy delays the benefits that students can derive from student teams. Considering these transitions occur year after year, students with severe disabilities can conceivably lose years of support, limiting their potential to benefit from educational services (Ferguson, Meyer, Jeanchild, Juniper, & Zingo, 1992; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1996).

In addition, a general education teacher can be a member of multiple student teams. For example, a general education teacher might have one student with severe disabilities, two students with learning disabilities, and one student with emotional/behavioral disorders enrolled in his/her class. Thus, the general education teacher can be a member of four different teams, since each of these students can have different special education teachers and related service personnel supporting them. For instance, the students with learning disabilities may have a reading resource teacher and a math resource teacher supporting them; whereas, the student with behavioral issues may have a behavior specialist and a school counselor supporting him.

Because individual student teams can take months to be productive and require extensive energy on the part of general education teachers, an alternative to student teams

must be developed. One alternative that has been explored in the literature is the collaborative support system.

### Collaborative Support System

A collaborative support system involves professionals working together to coordinate educational supports across students, classes, and grade levels. While it is difficult to be prescriptive about what a collaborative support system should look like, mostly because they are affected by the unique context of the school, a few descriptions of collaborative support systems that can help schools and districts understand what they entail exist (Fisher, Sax, & Pumpian, 1999). Collaborative support systems consist of close relationships between support providers (e.g., special education teachers, related service providers) and general education teachers. Teams work together over time to support the students at each specific grade level. In this way, special education teachers learn the specific curriculum and teaching styles of that team of general education teachers, while the general education teachers learn to collaborate with one set of support providers. This leads to greater collaboration, more efficient supports, and better outcomes for students with disabilities.

### Statement of the Problem

Though collaborative support systems are thought to provide more efficient supports for all students, they are not common in schools. Most schools are designed in ways that do not facilitate the collaboration among professionals needed in these systems (Skrtic, 1999; Villa & Thousand, 1995). Generally, schools are isolated contexts where teachers interact infrequently. Teachers cannot draw on each others' expertise and

understandings, and supports for instruction traditionally have been delivered in fragmented, isolated segments. Additionally, schools and school systems often maintain bureaucratic administrative structures, where decisions are made by administrators and carried out by school personnel. The isolated context of schools and top down administrative structures makes it difficult, if not impossible, for teachers to work collaboratively to plan and implement school and classroom practices that will facilitate the successful inclusion of students. Additionally, in this context, teachers do not have the power to make necessary decisions about school and classroom practices nor do they have opportunities to develop any type of cohesive vision for making these decisions. A cohesive vision of education shared by all members of the school community is also important to collaboration because it enables collective reflection on the decisions made and their outcomes. Without this collaborative system, school personnel and families work within the context of individual student teams, constantly re-inventing the wheel for each student they encounter.

Creating a collaborative system that supports all students requires major systemic reform (Fisher, Sax, & Pumpian, 1999; Stainback & Stainback, 1991). Though there are descriptions of collaborative support systems in the literature, there are no descriptions of the reform process that fostered this type of collaboration (Fisher, Sax, & Pumpian, 1999).

Thus, schools attempting to create collaborative support systems must turn to other sources for information about how to create structures that promote system-wide collaboration. The literature on general school reform provides some insight into the processes necessary for collaborative schools. Experts in general school reform

consistently report that reform is the result of interactions among members of a school community (Guerra, Jackson, Madsen, Thompson, & Ward, 1992; Nicastro, 1997). At the heart of reform there is typically a structure that brings members of a school community together and enables them to discuss their instructional practices.

It is clear from the literature that collaboration can only occur if some type of discussion forum is supported. A discussion forum is a structure that facilitates on-going meetings of all the constituencies that make up a school community, including families, teachers, support personnel (e.g., physical therapists, social workers, paraprofessionals), administration, and community members (Swaim, 1996; Zachariya, 1996). With representation of all constituencies from the school community, the discussion forum is used to make decisions regarding the process and direction of the proposed reform. It also serves to enhance overall communication in the school. All constituencies in the school community are informed and involved in the reform efforts through their representatives. Each representative acts as a liaison and voices the interests of their constituency. In the literature, one type of discussion forum is the school task force. The school task force met regularly to plan activities that both nurtured the reform and brought the schools closer to their visions.

### Contextual Supports

While the school task force can be a potential vehicle for creating collaboration in a school and carrying out reform, it cannot exist in a vacuum. Certain contextual variables must be in place to facilitate the work of the school task force. These variables include (a) shared power through facilitative leadership, (b) the presence of a collaborative community; (c) school community members' acceptance of a common

vision of teaching and learning, and (d) the ability to foster ongoing innovation (Guerra, Jackson, Madsen, Thompson, & Ward, 1992; Nicastro, 1997). The efficacy of the school task force is dependent upon the availability of these contextual supports.

### Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Currently, the inclusion of students with severe disabilities is supported most often through the use of student teams that are effective but inefficient. These student teams often exist in a school culture of isolation that does not provide broad support for collaboration. Thus, student teams are often in the position of continually reinventing the wheel, as there is no cohesive vision for inclusion or common knowledge base from which they can operate. Collaborative support systems are a more efficient way to support students with severe disabilities in inclusive general education settings. Because schools are not designed to support such collaborative systems, systemic reform is required to create them for students with severe disabilities. Though descriptions of collaborative support systems exist in the literature, descriptions of the reform efforts required to create these systems are not available (Fisher, Sax, & Pumpian, 1999).

The general school reform literature offers some insight into structures that can be used to promote this type of collaboration. These structures are often referred to as discussion forums. One example of a discussion forum is a school task force. A school task force (STF) is a collection of key school community members who meet with the support of the entire school community to plan, implement, and evaluate activities related to reform. While the STF has been used in the general education literature to enable reform, there is no research available in the literature on reform for successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities. Thus, its potential for establishing the type of



collaboration necessary to support inclusion is unknown. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the role of a school task force in developing a collaborative support system for all students, including those with severe disabilities in general education settings.

### Research Questions

#### Main Research Question

Given the purpose of this research study, the main question that was addressed is the following: "How does a school task force influence school reform efforts to include students with severe disabilities?"

#### Secondary Research Questions

Within the investigation of the school task force's influence on school reform efforts to include students with severe disabilities, the following secondary questions were addressed:

1. How does the school task force develop as a discussion forum?
2. What supports and barriers does the school task force encounter?
3. What effect does the school task force have on including students with severe disabilities?

### Definition of Terms

For the reader's increased understanding, technical terms included in this manuscript have been defined in this section.

Collaboration is a supportive professional relationship that facilitates the continued mutual growth of each professional.

Collaborative support system is a set of professionals that purposefully has designed supports for all students, even those with the most severe disabilities, to maintain their optimal participation within general education environments. A collaborative support system coordinates educational supports across students, classes, and grade levels.

Collegiality encompasses positive interactions that may include sharing of daily events, mutual concern for the well being of others, or some problem solving at personal or professional levels.

Constituency is a subgroup of individuals from the school community. Individuals within the subgroup have similar roles and expectations for support from the school system (e.g., parents, building administrators, special area teachers, grade level teachers, special education teachers).

Discussion forum is a setting in which a group of individuals that represent each constituency within the school community meets, with the support of the entire school community, to plan, implement, and evaluate activities related to reform.

Inclusion is an educational practice in which students with disabilities are educated in general education settings, through participation in activities with their same age peers, and with all the adaptations and supports they require, to meet their individual goals, in their home school.

School task force is one example of a discussion forum.

### Delimitations of the Study

The study is delimited by geographic region, one elementary school in a coastal region of Florida. The subjects were members of the school task force; therefore, sampling was purposive.

### Limitations of the Study

The researcher in this study was a participant observer. The data were collected using qualitative research methods. Specific constraints of the use of qualitative methods are discussed in Chapter 3.

### Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 contains a review of literature related to school reform. Methods used for implementation of the study are detailed in Chapter 3. Results of the study are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the results, implications of the results, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

### Introduction

Inclusion requires systemic reform and support of the entire school community. To foster school reform, school communities need to rethink their school and classroom practices in dramatic ways (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996; Myers, 1997; Pugach, 1996). This rethinking of current practices cannot occur in isolation because it depends the entire school community's group problem-solving efforts. Traditionally, most members of a school community spend the majority of their time working alone, with few opportunities to work together (Fullan & Miles, 1992). Thus, little time is available for members of the professional community to meet to plan reform and, consequently, develop the systemic supports necessary for school reform.

School reform experts describe the school task force (STF) as one vehicle for promoting community problem solving (Ehman, 1995; Meyers, 1997; Senge & McLagan, 1993). An STF is a group of individuals that represents each constituency within a school community and has the support of the entire school community to make significant changes in school and classroom practices (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Goldman, Dunlop, & Conley, 1991; Sorenson, 1995). The STF meets regularly in order to plan, implement, and assess the effectiveness of activities related to the reform process. Since it provides a vehicle for discussion and problem solving among members of the school

community, an STF can be important to a school community in the midst of the reform process.

The success of an STF depends on the ability of its members to move the school reform agenda forward (Musetti, McCormack, O'Hara, Gibson, & McMahon, 1997). Thus, the people selected to serve on the task force, the way the STF functions as a group, and how it interacts both with members of the school community and members of the local community affect its ultimate effectiveness in facilitating reform.

In the next section, a conceptual framework is delineated that describes how an STF develops and operates. Additionally, this framework describes how the school context and the STF interact to facilitate or constrain the success of reform. This conceptual framework was developed as a result of an extensive literature review. The literature review began with an ERIC search for all publications related to school reform for the years 1996-1999, which resulted in a set of 6,670 publications. The set then was limited by defining variables related to the *process* of school reform. The resulting set of publications was used to conduct an ancestral search. In addition, landmark studies of school reform recommended by experts in the field were gathered. From this review, a subset of literature was chosen that described various discussion forums used to guide reform efforts. This subset of literature provided the basis for the following review.

### Conceptual Framework

School reform literature describes how an STF (a) is initiated as a vehicle for reform, (b) works to foster on-going change efforts and (c) communicates its work with members of the school community (Ehman, 1995; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Lashway, 1997; Smith & Stolp, 1995). Additionally, researchers have

delineated a list of key contextual variables that influence the STF's effectiveness (Guerra, Jackson, Madsen, Thompson, & Ward, 1992; Musetti, O'Hara, Gibson, & McMahon, 1997; Nicastro, 1997).

The following conceptual framework describes literature related to how the STF develops and works and how key contextual variables influence its effectiveness. The development of ownership is described first, because according to the school reform research, this determines the success of the reform effort in the long run. The initiating event that prompts the formation of an STF and STF membership affects commitment to the reform effort (Goldman & Conley, 1997; McAdoo, 1998). Second, variables that relate to the STF's ability to facilitate ongoing action are described. How STF members conduct their business and relate to one another either facilitates or hinders ongoing interactions necessary for reform (Ehman, 1995; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Powell & Hyle, 1997). Third, variables are described that relate to the STF's ability to extend reform efforts to include the other school and community members. How STF members relate to the outside members has an impact on the STF's success in promoting reform (Ehman, 1995; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Kemp, 1996). If the STF works in isolation, the school and community cannot participate in the effort; therefore, the school and community fail to develop ownership and implement the reform (Goldman, Dunlop, & Conley, 1991; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996; Sorenson, 1995).

Finally, the STF does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it exists within a broader school context that influences its effectiveness in carrying out school reform efforts. The literature describes four contextual variables that influence the effectiveness of the STF. These include (a) sharing power through facilitative leadership (Giles, 1998; Goldman &

Conley, 1997; Goldmam, Dunlap & Conley, 1991; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Sorenson, 1995), (b) developing a collaborative community (Evans, Townsend, Duchnowski, & Holcutt, 1996; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Lashway, 1997; Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997; Zachariya, 1996), (c) creating a common vision (Banks & Banks, 1997; Nicastro, 1998; Swaim, 1996; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993; Zachariya, 1996), and (d) fostering ongoing innovation (Kemp, 1996; Malloy, 1994; Mussetti, O'Hara, Gibson, & McMahon, 1997).

Each of these key contextual variables was present before the beginning of the reform process, emerged during the reform process, or resulted from the STF's efforts (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Goldman, Dunlop, & Conley, 1991). The relationship between the STF's efforts and the contextual variables was bi-directional. The contextual variables influenced the effectiveness of the STF as a vehicle for reform, and in turn, the contextual variables were affected by the STF. For example, one key contextual variable described in the literature was developing a collaborative community. In schools that had not developed a collaborative community, there had been little previous discussion about issues such as teaching philosophy or methods. Since the members of the STFs had not had prior experience voicing their views about issues such as inclusion, it took longer for these members to become comfortable participating in collaborative discussions and developing a common vision. Time spent fostering collaborative discussions and crafting a common vision impeded the STF's progress as they began to discuss plans for reform. On the other hand, when the STF began to engage in collaborative discussions, a sense of professional community emerged and members began to take action toward reform. Regardless of when and how key contextual variables emerged, they were instrumental in determining the influence an STF had on the reform process and the success of the

reform (Ehman, 1995; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Guerra, Jackson, Madsen, Thompson, & Ward, 1992; Nicastrò, 1997; Wagner, 1994).

### Development and Operation of the STF

How an STF develops and works depends on its ability to develop ownership of the reform, facilitate professional interactions, and engage the school community in the reform effort. Development of ownership for the reform effort depends on two factors: (a) the initial impetus for reform and (b) the representation of members on the STF. Once the STF is initiated, its ability to facilitate ongoing professional interactions becomes important, and depends on the group dynamics, group leadership, and specific activities. Finally, the STF must have some vehicle for engaging the school community in the reform. The STF members must extend the effects of the reform by consistently and frequently communicating with the school community members, district administrators, and the local community.

### Developing Ownership

The STF development is important because it directly affects the ability of its members to become committed to the reform. Because reform takes significant time, energy, and support, a sense of commitment is critical (Cuban, 1990). Researchers have demonstrated that when the STF members were committed to a reform effort, they were more vested in its outcomes. On the contrary, when the STF members were not committed to the reform, they had little concern for its successful implementation (Goldman & Conley, 1997; Lusi, 1997; McAdoo, 1998; Raber & Roach, 1997; Sarason, 1993).



Initiating events. Typically, an STF is formed in response to some type of initiating event. This action or event significantly affects how ownership develops as it influences the initial purpose of the STF, the membership of the STF, and the level of initial support it will receive from school and district administration. Several types of initiating actions or events were identified in the literature, and the nature of these events influenced how ownership developed. When reform was mandated by a state legislature or department of education (Goldman & Conley, 1997; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Lusi, 1997; Greyerbiehl, 1993; Raber & Roach, 1997), STFs were often convened to bring the school into compliance with new state guidelines. However, because this type of initiating event was external to the school community (i.e., the state department), STF members felt little ownership of the reform (Goldman & Conley, 1997; Lashway, 1997; McAdoo, 1998; Raber & Roach, 1997). This scenario was made worse when membership on the STF was mandated by a school or district administrator (Lusi, 1997). To increase interest, school and district administrators sometimes offered incentives for members of the school community to join the STF. Under these conditions, STF members had little vested interest in fundamental change or providing support to create reform (Goldman & Conley, 1997; Greyerbiehl, 1993; Raber & Roach, 1997). Moreover, even if a school did achieve some level of change, the change achieved did not resemble the intended reforms (Raber & Roach, 1997). Often the changes were superficial rather than structural (e.g., a change in policy with no direct effect on classroom practices) (Goldman & Conley, 1997; Raber & Roach, 1997). For example, Raber & Roach (1997) described outcomes of a state reform agenda intended to increase teacher accountability for student learning. However, instead of making changes that would result in better teaching

practices, the local school districts simply increased their efforts to recruit certified teachers. While securing certified teachers is one route to improving teaching, it certainly did not reflect the full intent of the reform (i.e., increased teacher accountability).

External agents (e.g., large corporations) were also responsible for initiating reform when they sought out school partnerships in a specific reform effort (McAdoo, 1998; Musetti, McCormack, O'Hara, Gibson, McMahon, 1997; Noffke, Clark, Palmeri-Santiago, Sadler, & Shujaa, 1996). While the schools willingly partnered with external agents, the reform efforts were often unsuccessful (McAdoo, 1998; McMahon, 1997). In these cases, the STF relied heavily, if not exclusively, on the external group carrying out the reform effort, and thus never developed ownership for the reform (Noffke et al., 1996). Only when the external group that created the initiating event acted as a critical friend. That is, the external group or critical friend helped the school community assess current practices and reflect on reform efforts. In these cases, the STF became active participants in the reform. Without STF commitment, the reform effort frequently stalled when the external group ended its partnership with the school (McAdoo, 1998; Musetti et al., 1997; Noffke et al., 1996).

District or school level administrators also initiated reform efforts by introducing new visions for teaching and learning (Bondy, Kilgore, Ross, & Webb, 1994; Goldman, Dunlop, & Conley, 1991; Lashway, 1997; Smith & Stolp, 1995; Spillane, 1997; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993). The STF, in these instances, was formed to operationalize this new vision, and the success of the STF was dependent on leadership. Reform efforts that district and school administrators clearly supported had the best chance of success, particularly when the administrators were able to demonstrate key leadership abilities.

Specifically, quality leaders were able to find ways to share decision-making power with STF members regarding significant issues affecting reform. Additionally, leaders were able to foster professional development and collaboration, help the STF create a clear vision for reform, foster an understanding of and commitment to reform, and support innovations resulting from reform (Tompkins & Cooper, 1993). On the other hand, when leaders were unwilling or unable to develop these abilities or capacities, the STF was less likely to become committed to the reform, and in most cases the reform failed (Smith & Stolp, 1995; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993). A 10-year study of site based management (SBM) reform efforts in the Chicago Public Schools provides an illustration of the role leadership played in initiating reform and developing ownership for it (Lashway, 1997). In this study, at the beginning of the reform, the superintendent attempted to designate the principal as solely responsible for implementing SBM. A sole decision maker violates of the intent of SBM. The STFs were not created, and the mechanisms for fostering professionalism and collaboration were not considered. Not surprisingly, this initial attempt failed, as documented by measures of student learning and teacher satisfaction. Consequently, the superintendent revised his approach and placed responsibility for SBM with school-wide councils (i.e., STFs). As a result, this second attempt at SBM fostered professionalism and collaboration and was more successful (Lashway, 1997). Finally, parents have initiated reform efforts and the development of STFs when they organized and advocated for use of a specific educational strategy (Giles, 1998; Wagner & Sconyers, 1996). When parents drove the reform efforts, without sufficient commitment from the rest of the school community, change efforts focused on specific students or grade levels but typically were not school-wide. In these cases, the STF

became a temporary problem-solving organization to respond to the parents' concerns rather than for reform to truly exist. In this review, the ownership of the initiative either must be created within or adopted by the school community.

STF membership. Membership in an STF is also critical for developing commitment to the reform effort (Kemp, 1996; Nicastro, 1997). The school community members who make up the school task force can make or break a reform effort. When convening an STF, administrators must consider two factors regarding membership. First, all constituencies of the school community must be represented. Studies of successful school reform efforts showed that the STF members should include, school and district administrators, teachers from various subject areas and grade levels, parents, community members, and local businesses (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Goldman, Conley, & Dunlop, 1991; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Lashway, 1997; Sorenson, 1995; Swaim, 1996; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993).

Second, persons selected for the STF should represent various and diverse views in the school community (Lashway, 1997; Swaim, 1996). For all school community members to accept and implement decisions made by the STF, they must believe that all viewpoints about reform have been represented and considered during decision making. If the STF lacks full representation of different philosophical views, some members of the school community may feel alienated. For example, when the STF consisted of only members who favored the initiative, then the larger school community frequently failed to adopt the reform (Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Lashway, 1997; Swaim, 1996; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993). Those members who were not in favor of one particular reform

initiative did not comply with the decisions of the STF if their concerns with the initiative or their ideas regarding other alternatives were not considered.

### Facilitating Ongoing STF Action

How the STF conducts its work and how individual task force members relate to one another affect the implementation of reform efforts. Three important factors determine how effectively the STF functions. These factors include (a) member participation (Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Morley, 1994), (b) group leadership (Ehman, 1995), and (c) specific activities (e.g., assessing current practices, developing a common vision, developing an action plan, reassessing progress toward the common vision) (Ledell & Arnsperger, 1993; Morley, 1994).

Member participation. Member participation refers to how individual STF members interact and how comfortable they feel when they participate in collaborative discussions and activities within the STF meetings. Both professional and personal factors affect STF members' comfort with each other and, as a result, their participation on the STF. Professional factors affecting participation include (a) dedication to the specific reform agenda, (b) similarity of philosophy among group members, and (c) length of time teaching. In their study of school reform, Gremillion and Cody (1998) found two factors affected STF member participation. Specifically, when STF members were dedicated to the reform agenda, and their philosophies of education were similar, STF member participation increased. Additionally, they found that teachers with more experience were more likely to share opinions regarding reform and maintain their opinions regardless of the level of change that occurred. In comparison, STF members with less teaching experience showed greater change in their professional beliefs by

participating in reform efforts (Gremillion & Cody, 1998). Their results also indicate that personal qualities affected STF members' participation. These factors included (a) personal characteristics (e.g., optimistic, pessimistic, active, passive, and aggressive) (Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Morley, 1994), (b) existing relationships among STF members (external to the STF), and (c) length of time working in the school (Gremillion & Cody, 1998).

When planning membership on an STF, it is important to balance personality types. Personalities of individual STF members affected how comfortable the group became in sharing ideas and participating in professional discussions. In addition, personal characteristics greatly affected the individual member's power in the discussion and decisions made by the STF (Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Morley, 1994). For example, when all members of an STF were highly agreeable and not comfortable voicing their opinions, one STF member who held strong opinions could rule the decision making process. Alternatively, if all the STF members held strong opinions about the reform efforts and were not willing to compromise, the decision making process was stalled.

STF leadership. How the STF leader facilitates action during STF meetings either maintains progress toward reform or stalls further efforts (Fullan, 1991; Powell & Hyle, 1997; Rigazio-DiGilio & Benninghof, 1994). The STF leader must be able to organize meetings and facilitate active participation of all members if the group is to be a collaborative, effective vehicle for reform. In their study of STF leaders, Rigazio-DiGilio and Benninghof (1994) found that STF leaders must balance the need to structure collaborative discussions while maintaining sufficient flexibility to keep open dialogue among professionals.

STF activities. How the STF structures its time also affects its ability to carry out reform. While few studies specifically explore the activities of an STF, experts have described specific processes they believe critical to the success of the STF (Morley, 1994). These include (a) agenda building, (b) action planning, (c) accountability (review of progress), and (d) evaluation. Agenda building is a purposeful discussion about items to be discussed at future meetings. Experts assert that when all members have input into building the agenda, they are more likely to feel their concerns and input are considered and honored. The agenda also helps members come prepared for and stay focused during meetings. Action planning is a collaborative process for documenting and encouraging completion of specific actions that need to be accomplished between meetings. The action plan includes the item to be accomplished, members responsible for that item, and a date for task completion. Both agenda building and action planning, when completed collaboratively, increase STF members' ownership for reform tasks and, help them focus those efforts, and be accountable to reform goals (Morley, 1994). Accountability systems and evaluation allow members to revisit the vision of the STF and the efficacy of activities intended to achieve that reform.

#### Communicating with the School Community

The STF must develop communication with three groups. First, the STF must establish strong communication with administrators at both the school and district level. This communication ensures both alignment of STF goals with those of the larger school system and the administration's support for STF decisions (Lashway, 1997). Second, the STF must establish communication with the broader school community. The reform effort is only successful when the STF can extend the effects of the reform to the school

community. To achieve desired reform in the school community, the STF must develop a system of communication that regularly provides information and is accessible to all members of the school community (Sorenson, 1995; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993). An ongoing dialogue helps the larger school community understand, commit to, and act on the reform. The community at large should be informed of the changes occurring in the school (Kemp, 1996).

Interactions between the STF and other interested constituents must be two-way (Greyerbiehl, 1993; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996). Information must flow from the STF to outside groups and then back. Additionally, the communication must be ongoing and the STF must be accessible so that all people involved in the reform may voice their concerns (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996). On-going, open dialogue helps the school community stay abreast of changes being implemented by the STF.

### Key Contextual Variables

There are four key contextual variables that either hinder or facilitate the success of the STF in implementing a reform agenda. The degree to which these variables are present indicate a school community's readiness to undergo the reform process. When present, these variables can be strong supports for the school task force. If the variables are not present, the school task force's ability to initiate reform is diminished. In these cases, the school task force must work to develop these variables if they are to be successful in reform efforts. Specifically, these four key contextual variables are (a) sharing power through facilitative leadership (Ehman, 1995; Lashway, 1997; Sorenson, 1995), (b) developing a collaborative community (Lashway, 1997; Skrtic, 1999;



Zachariya; 1996), (c) creating a common vision (Sorenson, 1995; Swaim, 1996; Tompkins & Cooper, 1993), and (d) fostering ongoing innovation (Malloy, 1994; Spillane, 1997; Stokes & Howard, 1996). Each of these variables, its importance to reform efforts, and its impact on the school task force are described in the following sections. Additionally, the supports needed to foster the development of these key variables are described.

### Sharing Power Through Facilitative Leadership

Facilitative leadership involves administrators sharing power with other professionals and parents in the school community. Administrators who are facilitative leaders involve and support all members of the school community who are affected by a particular decision. Facilitative leadership is unlike a top-down leadership where the educational leader makes all the decisions and expects the school staff to carry them out. The facilitative leader supports group decision making through consensus, rather than through authoritarian leadership (Chelsey & Jordan, 1996). In schools that had facilitative leaders, the principal guided decisions, but all decisions were made with teachers' input, and often input was secured from all members of the school community.

Facilitative leadership is critical to the existence and success of the STF because it provides STF members with the power to make decisions about the reform process that are based on consensus (Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996). Without this power and consensus, the STF would be unable to make decisions critical for operationalizing reform efforts, nor develop a collective responsibility for the reform (Goldman, Dunlap, & Conley, 1991; Powell & Hyle, 1997; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). If a school administrator embraces facilitative leadership, then the STF can become an important

decision making body in the reform effort (Lashway, 1997). When members of a school community are provided opportunities for discussion and to make decisions about reform, they feel empowered and are willing to exert the effort necessary to make change (Chelsey & Jordan, 1996). If, on the other hand, a school administrator is a top-down leader, the STF will lack the decision-making power necessary to make significant changes. When STF members work to develop ideas for reform, but are not provided the power to enforce any of the ideas, they become disenfranchised. They do not have a voice in the decision making process, and they begin to see their efforts as futile. Consequently, they may lack the initiative to alter their practices (Lashway, 1997).

Becoming a facilitative leader, however, is not simple. It requires a change in role of both the principal and the teachers (Goldman, Dunlap, & Conley, 1991; Lashway, 1997). Principals must alter their position from one of ultimate authority to facilitators of decisions and actions in the school. Teachers must also take on a role that is often unfamiliar to them. They must move away from being passive recipients of decisions to becoming active members of the decision-making process (Giles, 1998). Ehman (1995), in his study of the development of interdisciplinary teacher teams, described this change in roles for both principals and teachers as difficult but necessary. As teachers formed alliances based on philosophical commonalities, friendships were affected. Forging relationships around social interactions played a secondary role at school as the teachers entered into collaborative decision making.

Finally, the presence of facilitative leadership is directly connected to the second key contextual variable, building a collaborative community. If decisions are to be made collectively, then discussion among school community members must occur. These

discussions should focus on decisions that must be made and strategies for executing and evaluating the school reform effort. This kind of discussion requires a change in the nature of interactions, level of talk, and the roles STF members and administrators play. School community members' interactions move from social topics to conversations about practices. Additionally, as the type of communication changes so does its intensity. Teachers move from having simplistic discussions about individual student problems, such as inattention or behavioral problems, to more complex discussions of practice and philosophy (Ehman, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989). In schools where constituencies have been coming together to discuss issues and make decisions related to instructional practices, the foundation of a collaborative community is built.

#### Developing a Collaborative Community

In a collaborative community, colleagues work together to reflect on practices, plan ways to improve practices, and nurture their growth as professionals (Giles, 1998; Myers, 1997; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). Members of collaborative communities are supportive of one another and provide feedback on educational practices to enhance the teaching and learning process. This collective focus on reflection and change helps to align classroom practices with the goals of the reform effort (Lashway, 1997).

The presence of a collaborative community is important to reform because it promotes trust and collective knowledge about school and classroom practices that are critical to identifying necessary areas of reform (Stanford, 1998). As school community members discuss their practices, share ideas, and reflect on their practices, they become more comfortable engaging in the type of collective critique necessary for reform (Meyers, 1997). They trust that they can voice concerns or propose changes that may be

dramatically different from the status quo without impunity. Moreover, because they have open conversations about decisions, they trust the intent of those decisions (Myers, 1997; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). Additionally, the existence of a collaborative community helps members develop a common knowledge base. As they gain knowledge about what is occurring throughout the school, they build relationships based on professional commonalities (Giles, 1998).

A common knowledge base and strong trusting relationships are critical supports for reform activities. When an STF is constructed within a collaborative community, its members will be more comfortable proposing actions related to reform compared to members of a school community who have previously been uninvolved and possibly unaware of the ways decisions are made. If a collaborative community does not exist, the STF will have to develop these relationships (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). Having to do so places an additional stressor on the STF. The STF will be slowed as its members grapple with developing professional relationships, while dealing with the complexities of reform (Giles, 1998).

Although essential to reform, many schools find it a struggle to build a collaborative community. Teachers must forge new relationships with each other, and often, the existing nature of their relationships must change. Mostly, teachers work in isolation and the nature of their relationships is largely social rather than professional (Ehman, 1995; Giles, 1998). When the community embraces professional collaboration, however, relationships change as individuals become collectively responsible for making decisions about school and classroom practices (Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Meyers, 1997). In several studies, researchers found that as teachers attempted to establish

professional collaboration, their personal relationships changed, often in negative ways (Ehman, 1995; Lashway, 1997). Former allegiances based on personal connections with friends at work were often challenged when participants' recognized their philosophical differences. School community members had to set aside some beliefs and embrace others as they discussed practices and aligned philosophy with practice. While this is an important step in developing a professional community, there is structure and comfort for those who are able to leave the decisions to someone else. Sometimes the development of professional relationships leads to discord when responsibility for decision making is based on the group of professionals (Ehman, 1995). However, this friction among colleagues in a developing collaborative community is minimal compared to the barriers faced by a school community attempting reform without strong bonds (Giles, 1998).

### Creating a Common Vision

A school community possesses a common vision when the members reach consensus about what their classroom and school practices (Smith & Stolpe, 1995). School community members reach agreement about the purpose of education, their philosophy of teaching and learning, and the practices that will achieve this purpose of education. Sorenson (1995), in his study of the development of a school covenant, described the importance of collective vision and values for the operating principles of a school. He stated that a comprehensive view of the education system beginning with the purpose of education, is the first step toward defining a professional educational community.

In the literature, there is no agreed upon vision for successfully reformed schools. Each community develops a unique philosophy dependent on both the school community

members and the needs of its students. This common vision is critical because it helps create a clear aim for the reform, which thus provides direction for school reform activities (Noffke, Clark, Palmeri-Santiago, Sadler, & Shujaa, 1996). Collectively, STF members can determine the incremental steps that are necessary to enact their vision. In a qualitative study of a school-based strategic planning team, Tompkins and Cooper (1993) described the development of a common vision of education as central to the school community's efforts to improve instruction and the building of a professional community. A common vision also assists community members as they assess their current practices, because it provides an ultimate goal against which reform efforts can be measured (McAdoo, 1998; Myers, 1997). In contrast, if there is no common vision, there may be change but no progress. School community members may become frustrated because they are working hard to change but do not know the purpose of their efforts (McAdoo, 1998; Myers, 1997).

### Fostering Ongoing Innovation

Many schools involved in reform efforts have a history of implementing innovative practices. Researchers defined a variety of practices that facilitated continued reform, including block scheduling, integrated curriculum, real world/community relevant subject matter, hands-on learning, and the use of technology (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kemp, 1996; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996).

These innovative practices assisted the reform effort in two ways. First, fewer roadblocks to reform exist in schools engaged in innovative practices. For example, Kemp (1996) and Musetti, McCormack, O'Hara, Gibson, and McMahon (1997)

described how previous technology reforms in their schools assisted communication between teachers and the construction of a collaborative community. Specifically, Nicastro (1997) described how block scheduling, a previous reform in her school, provided increased shared planning time for teachers. During that time, teachers began to form a professional community, reflecting on and discussing their practices. These connections among teachers increased the presence of integrated teaching (e.g., English and history teachers co-teaching a common period of history).

Second, schools engaged in innovative practices are more likely to embrace further change. A school community that is innovative in its approach is more accepting of change than one that holds firm to traditional practices. Acceptance of change will assist the school task force in suggesting and implementing new practices in the school community (Spillane, 1997; Zachariya, 1996).

Nicastro (1997) indicated that professional communities are typically filled with innovative practices, however, she did not describe how innovative practices can be implemented. She described the ease with which teachers interacted and made changes to their own practices when they were provided a forum for interacting professionally. However, she did not discuss specific ways to fostering ongoing innovation.

Supports to build key variables. Fullan and Miles (1992) describe the activities involved in reform as “resource hungry.” These activities include developing solutions to complex problems, building professional community, and learning and using new skills. Because reform is difficult, complex work, a variety of supports are necessary to foster an environment that promotes reform activities. These supports include (a) sufficient time to work together; (b) professional development opportunities; and (c) assistance from

members both within and beyond the school community who have needed expertise (Chelsea & Jordan, 1996; Noffke, Clark, Palmeri, Santiago, Sadler, & Shujaa, 1996; Zachariya, 1996).

The reform process takes extensive amounts of time since collaborative community can only be established through structured time spent together (Jenlink, Reigluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996; Myers, 1997). Teachers and other school community members need to spend time together reflecting on instructional practices, developing a common vision, and coming to consensus regarding necessary reform actions (Myers, 1997; Rosenfield, 1996). Sorenson (1995) described the importance of time together and offered several ways in which administrators increased time to meet by altering their school calendar, rearranging the school day, and providing release time for teachers to meet.

When time is not provided for school community members, the reform effort is likely to fail. Evans, Townsend, Duchnowski, and Hocutt (1996), in their qualitative study of a university-school partnership reform effort described the difficulty teachers had when they had no time to meet together and discuss professional issues. The school only allowed minimal release time for teachers. In addition to the daily demands of their teaching schedule, the teachers were expected to collaboratively plan and implement innovative practices on their own time. These demands built resentment and resulted in poor attendance at meetings. Under these circumstances, it was difficult for the group to develop consensus on needs or proposed actions; the reform did not succeed.

High quality professional development is also important to reform, because it is difficult to change school and classroom practices (Havelock, 1973; Sparks & Loucks-



Horsley, 1990; Stokes & Howard, 1996). Administrators, teachers, parents, and other members of the school community need concrete examples of innovative practices demonstrated, critiqued, and supported in their school. Additionally, they need opportunities to collectively discuss and reflect on their practices in order to change (Sparks-Langer et al., 1990). High quality professional development activities include a variety of ongoing interactions such as school-wide projects, review of educational practices, and information gathering trips and seminars (Stokes & Howard, 1996). These examples and models of innovation maintain the momentum of the reform process because teachers and administrators are more assured that the changes they are making will result in effective student results. Best practice in professional development activities allows for reflection and collaborative discussion regarding examples and models of the reform initiative (Sparks, & Loucks-Horsley, 1990). Professional development activities are important during reform because it is difficult to change teaching practice.

Administrators, teachers, parents, and other members of the school community need concrete examples of innovative practices demonstrated, critiqued, and supported in their school (Caldwell, 1989; Havelock, 1973; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austing, & Hall, 1987; Little, 1982; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990; Stokes & Howard, 1996). School community members involved in reform need examples and models of the innovations at work to maintain the momentum of the reform process. These examples provide a goal toward which teachers can strive and provide encouragement that the effort needed for reform will result in a practice that is effective for students.

High quality professional development efforts also help to promote collaboration. Ehman (1995) described the growth of professional relationships through professional

development activities. Many of the teachers reported reinvigoration of their thinking resulting from sustained contact with colleagues. Others have reported that professional relationships developed as teachers continually strove to improve their instructional methods and use innovative practices required by the reform effort (Meyers, 1997; Nicastro, 1997; Stanford, 1998). Ehman found that group problem solving and peer interaction increased as teacher isolation dissolved. Meyers (1997) in his discussion of professional development concurred with Ehman's points and stated that common experiences and professional development encourage strong healthy interdependent relationships based on a desire for mutual professional growth.

Commitment to the reform process is also essential to its success. The entire school community must be committed to all reform efforts in order to meet their shared goal. To develop commitment, school members need to be aware that reform is difficult and requires a high level of support (Kemp, 1996; Swaim, 1996). Support must be provided from a variety of constituencies in the work environment: (a) building and district level administration (McAdoo, 1998; Swaim, 1996; Zachariya, 1996); (b) faculty (Goldman, Conley, & Dunlop, 1991; Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Noffke, Clark, Palmeri, Santiago, Sadler, & Shujaa, 1996); (c) families (Giles, 1998; McAdoo, 1998; Swaim, 1996); (d) community members (Musetti, McCormack, O'Hara, Gibson, & McMahon, 1997; Swaim, 1996); and (e) experts (Noffke et al., 1996; Spillane, 1997; Valli, Cooper, & Frankes, 1997). Each constituency has different resources to assist in the reform effort. Administrators control the funds necessary to provide professional development activities for school personnel and decision-making power that must be shared with individuals involved in the reform (McAdoo, 1998; Noffke, Clark, Palmeri, Santiago, Sadler, &

Shujaa, 1996). All faculty members in a school community must understand the extensive time and effort required for reform. Whether they are directly involved in decision-making or acting as individual community members, their workloads must shift to allow those most involved in reform efforts time to accomplish the work (Goldman, Conley, & Dunlop, 1991; Gremillion & Cody, 1998). Families need to understand the reform effort and how it will improve their school. Families can offer volunteer time and public support for the reform effort (Wagner & Sconyers, 1996). If families are not informed of the changes, misunderstandings can occur that could jeopardize public and/or administrative supports for an innovative practice. Community members (e.g., business leaders) should be aware and involved in reform efforts as they will vote on upcoming budgets and can lend external expertise and volunteer time to a school (Musetti, McCormack, O'Hara, Gibson, & McMahon, 1997; Swaim, 1996). External experts, such as university personnel or leaders in areas of innovation, can provide information regarding the reform and act as critical friends (Spillane, 1997; Valli, Cooper, & Franks, 1997). Each of these groups can work with a school community to increase the likelihood a reform will succeed. If excluded, any of these groups can work against change and derail a reform effort.

### Summary

To support inclusion of students with severe disabilities, collaborative support systems must be created. Although the literature provides descriptions of collaborative support systems, there is no discussion of the ways schools can create such innovative supports. Literature on school reform provides insight into the process necessary for schools to change their practices. Specifically, the creation of a discussion forum (i.e.,

school task force) and contextual supports to enable this forum are described as necessary structures for change.

The literature described the creation of a School Task Force (STF) as a viable reform vehicle as determined by the way it is developed and the representation of all the school's constituencies. The STF's ability to facilitate ongoing action for reform is dependent on member participation, group leadership, and the activities in which the STF engages. The growth of reform initiatives beyond the STF, into the larger school community is dependent on the STF member's ability to develop structures for communication between the STF and all other constituencies.

Contextual variables can assist or hinder the development, ongoing action toward reform, and growth of the STF. Specifically, the literature described four key variables that effect the STF, including sharing power through facilitative leadership, developing a collaborative community, creation of a common vision, and fostering ongoing innovation. Each of these variables has influence over the STF. This study draws on the STF research in an investigation of as school reform effort to include students with severe disabilities as a vehicle for reform with the necessity for change in practices to support inclusion.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the role an STF played in a school reform initiative to support the inclusion of students with disabilities. Methods and procedures used in this study are outlined in this chapter. The grand tour question for this study was as follows: How does a school task force influence school reform efforts to include students with severe disabilities? The following secondary questions were addressed:

1. How does the school task force develop as a discussion forum?
2. What supports and barriers does the school task force encounter?
3. What effect does the school task force have on the inclusion of students with severe disabilities?

### Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative inquiry provides an opportunity for in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena and contextual variables. Additionally, qualitative research permits the investigator to consider information within the natural context of events and provides opportunities for insights into a multi-dimensional social phenomenon such as a school task force (Merriam, 1988). Qualitative research methodology provides an understanding of participants' interpretations and perceptions when manipulation of potential causes of behavior is not possible or feasible, or when variables are too deeply embedded in the context to be studied in isolation (Sherman & Webb, 1990).

Studying the effects of an STF on a school reform effort to educate students with severe disabilities in general education settings is a descriptive task. In this study, variables related to the development of an STF are explored holistically. This study explored ways that contextual factors and multiple interactions of STF members influenced the how the STF developed as a discussion forum, and then how the STF influenced school reform efforts to include students with severe disabilities. Answering the research question required in-depth understanding of interactions and relationships and the emerging characteristics of the STF. The type of information, level of understanding required, and the dependency of the study on the unique context led to the use of qualitative methods.

### Context

This investigation focused on the school reform process for including students with severe disabilities in one elementary school in Florida. The following section provides information regarding the context in which the study occurred.

#### County Level Contextual Variables

The setting was a small district in rural eastern Florida, named Coastal County. The main economic resources in the area were tourism and agriculture. Coastal County School District was educating 13,945 students at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year. For a rural area, the district's student population was diverse in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status: 71% were Caucasian, 17% were African-American, 9% were Hispanic/Latino, 1% were Asian, and less than 1% were Native American or multi-racial. Students with disabilities made up 16.7% of the student population and an additional

5.8% were identified as gifted. Forty-two percent of the students in Coastal County school district received free or reduced lunch. What was not evident in these statistics was the large disparity between the socio-economic and racial status of the beach communities and the agricultural area of the county.

There were 17 schools in Coastal County including two high schools, four middle schools, eight elementary schools, two magnet schools, and one center school for students with severe disabilities. Administratively, the special and general education systems were separate. Two parallel administrative units, the Department of Special Education and the Department of Education, were led by department directors who guided the district's policies regarding curriculum, personnel, and other administrative decisions.

### School Level Context

Perseverance Elementary was one of the eight elementary schools in rural Coastal County. At the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year, Perseverance Elementary was educating 652 students. During the 1998-99 school year, the Perseverance Elementary student population grew by 4.5%, approximately 30 students. The school had recently been remodeled but still had classes housed in six portable trailers due to continued rapid growth. The school had been adopted by and received significant monetary contributions from a major professional sports organization. A large part of the renovation project was financed through this sports organization and the entire campus had a sports related theme. Additionally, the organization helped finance technological advances in the school. All classrooms had computers and internet connections. In addition, the school

had a closed circuit television system, a media lab, and teacher work centers in each wing.

Teachers and administration. There were 37 teachers on the Perseverance Elementary campus: two at pre-kindergarten, five at kindergarten, six at first grade, five at second grade, four at third grade, four at fourth grade, one in a mixed grade third-fourth grade class, four at fifth grade, and one at fifth grade in a self-contained drop out prevention program. In addition to the grade specific general education teachers, there were five full time special education teachers and one who was part time supporting students with disabilities at Perseverance Elementary. All teachers were certified and taught in their certification area except for four teachers from the following grade levels or areas of special education: kindergarten, students with emotional disabilities, students with learning disabilities, and severe emotional disturbance. Perseverance Elementary had a three person administrative team on site to assist teachers. These administrators included a principal, a resource specialist, and a student support specialist who was also the vice-principal.

Student population. Perseverance Elementary had an ethnically and socio-economically diverse student population. Over 25% of the students were reported as racially or ethnically diverse, including 20 students for whom English was a second language. Sixty percent of Perseverance Elementary students received free or reduced lunch. Perseverance Elementary School was a Title 1 school. The Perseverance Elementary School zone included the county's low income housing program and rent controlled housing. Many of Perseverance Elementary's families were agriculture



workers or workers who supported the area's thriving tourist market (e.g., hotel workers). The Perseverance Elementary student population was highly transient.

Students with disabilities. Perseverance Elementary was a district cluster site for students with a variety of disabilities including students with autism, students with emotional disabilities, students labeled as severe emotionally disabled, and pre-kindergarten age students identified as at-risk. In August of 1999, at the beginning of this study, Perseverance Elementary was educating 123 students classified for special education. Of those, 72% were zoned to have Perseverance Elementary as their home school. The rest (28%) were originally zoned for other elementary schools but were bused to Perseverance Elementary for special education services. Although Perseverance Elementary was a cluster site for students with certain types of disabilities, the school bused some of its students with disabilities to other schools for services. Students labeled as gifted were bused to other schools that provided self-contained gifted classes, and all students with severe disabilities, other than autism, were bused to a self-contained school for students with disabilities.

Despite being a cluster site, some progress toward inclusion had been made over time. Originally, the school had a segregated wing for classes of students with disabilities, but at the time of this study there were self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities spread throughout the campus. The students educated in the self-contained classes had some opportunities for participation in general education classes, specifically special area classes such as art, physical education, and music. In addition to the self-contained classrooms, 4 years earlier, a co-taught, multi-age classroom was created for students with autism and their peers at the first and second grade level. This

class was initiated and co-taught by one general education teacher and the teacher of the self-contained class for students with autism. This co-taught classroom remained intact until the students finished fourth or fifth grade. When the older students with autism transitioned to middle school during the 1998-99 school year, there were no longer enough students to generate sufficient numbers of faculty to support a co-taught classroom. The co-teaching situation ended, some students with autism transitioned to middle school, some were placed in a self-contained varying exceptionalities class, and some were included, full time in general education, with support from the part-time special education teacher. In addition to including several students with autism in general education, two kindergarten students with severe disabilities were included in general education classes during the 1998-99 school year by parent request.

#### Historical Context for the Task Force

In the spring of 1998, the district special education director, the principal of Perseverance Elementary, and a consultant from a state funded project applied to participate in another state wide systems change project to facilitate the inclusion of students with severe disabilities. The district and school were accepted into the project, and as a result, district and school task forces on inclusion were initiated. To participate in the systems change project, the selected schools and districts had to develop task forces that involved participation of key community stakeholders. That is, representation of all school community members (e.g., principal, district administration, parents, special and general education teachers) was required on both school and district task forces. A facilitator from the school community planned monthly school and district task force meetings with guidance from project staff. During the STF meetings, school task force

members examined current practices for students with disabilities and determined a vision for reform. This vision for reform was to be the foundation that would lead to school and district support systems for the inclusion of students with disabilities. In return for their commitment, project staff acted as critical friends to the task forces. That is, they helped STF members examine their practices for students with severe disabilities and provided technical assistance to classes in which students with severe disabilities were included.

The first year of this project, 1998-99, was a time of negotiation between the district administrators and the systemic change project personnel, as they discussed their visions of education for students with disabilities and the ways they perceived that change might occur in the county. An STF began to meet at Perseverance Elementary in the fall of the 1998-99 school year. An assessment of current practices for students with severe disabilities was the first activity of this STF. At the end of the assessment, many STF members were frustrated by their low score on the assessment which they believed was due to district level decisions that were not under their control. For example, they believed that the districts' decision to education some students with severe disabilities at a center school and maintain Perseverance Elementary as a cluster site made it impossible for them to obtain an inclusive score. Attendance issues, canceled meetings, and lack of support from district administration plagued this first attempt to develop a school task force. By the end of the 1998-1999 school year, the Perseverance Elementary STF had dissolved.

At the end of Spring 1999, however, potential changes in the number of students with disabilities and the funding that would become available encouraged school

personnel to reconsider services for students with disabilities. A large number of students with disabilities were transitioning from Perseverance Elementary School to middle school. Thus, several teachers realized that the special education programs in which they had worked would no longer be financially supported. To address to their concerns, the teachers enlisted the support of the principal to find ways to maintain their current programs (e.g., co-teach classroom, self-contained classroom) or revisit options that would allow them to maintain their positions at the school. The principal saw the inclusion project as one possible way to maintain their positions. He spoke to the director of special education about making a second attempt to participate in the systemic change project. This investigation examined the role of an STF in the second attempt at systemic change in Perseverance Elementary.

### Participants

Over the course of the 1999-2000 school year, up to 25 people were members of the Perseverance Elementary STF, with some personnel being more consistent members than others. For some aspects of the research (e.g., STF meetings, informal conversations) participants were aware of and agreed to be participants in research as part of the larger project. In addition, anyone who attended an STF meeting was asked to participate in the interview portion of the study. Thirteen STF members, the most consistent participants in the STF, gave their informed consent and were interviewed twice, once in the fall (October through November, 1999) and again at the end of the school year (May 2000). The participants who took part in the interviews were a building administrator, a district administrator, three special education teachers of students with mild disabilities, one special education teacher of students with severe disabilities, five

general education teachers at a variety of grade levels, a paraprofessional, and a parent of children with severe disabilities. The remaining teachers who did not participate were made aware that data was being collected on meetings they attended.

### Researcher Role

The researcher in this systemic change project acted as a participant observer who occasionally asked questions and provided comments on the process of change during STF meetings. A participant observer comes to a social situation with two goals: (a) to participate in a social phenomenon and (b) to observe and study the people, activities and physical context of a social phenomenon (Spradley, 1980). As a participant observer, the researcher had access to all STF meetings. Participation in the meetings allowed the researcher to understand the development and struggles of the STF as members began to initiate the reform in the school community. Spradley (1980) explained that participant observation “involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different” (p.3). Through participation, one can “experience the activities directly . . . get the feel of what events are like, and . . . record your own perceptions” (p.51). As a participant observer, the researcher (a) observed all school task force meetings during the 1999-2000 school year; (b) acquired reflections on STF meetings from a variety of STF members; (c) collected artifacts related to STF activities; and (d) interviewed 13 of the STF members at the beginning and end of the school year regarding the STF and the reform process.

## Methods and Procedures

### Data Collection

The researcher used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. Data collection and analysis are described in this section. To study the research questions the researcher took field notes of meetings and informal conversations, audiotaped formal interviews, and collected relevant artifacts. Each of these methods of data collection is described.

Field notes. Field notes are a qualitative researcher's description of a social phenomenon (Spradley, 1979). In participant observation, field notes begin during observations and interviews as a condensed account. Since the researcher is involved in the phenomenon, full descriptions during the specific event are often not feasible. Instead, researchers write words and phrases that will provide memories of the important features of a phenomenon after it has occurred. Specifics included in a condensed account may include names or initials of individuals involved in the situation, brief descriptors of the setting of the event, the time of the event, and some verbatim quotes that seem especially important during the event. Later, after the phenomenon has taken place, the researcher uses the condensed account to construct the expanded account (Spradley, 1979). When writing the expanded account, the researcher uses the phrases from the condensed account to record as full a description of the social phenomenon as possible. The expanded account includes full paragraphs or pages regarding setting, individuals involved in the social phenomenon, the relationship, body language and tone of voice of the individuals, and participants' dialogue.

Field notes were collected at the eight STF meetings that occurred each month during the 1999-2000 school year. The first STF meeting was held October 4, 1999 and the last was held May 9, 2000. There were eight regular STF meetings, which lasted a total of 565 minutes. The average meeting was 71 minutes in length. In addition to the eight regular meetings, there was one full day STF planning meeting, which lasted approximately 5 hours.

Reflections. Reflexivity is the method of using a research participant as a constructor and interpreter of social phenomenon (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Researchers who are not members of a specific social context may lack tacit knowledge of cultural norms and rules (Spradley, 1979). Reflection, allows individuals involved in a social phenomenon to use their own cultural perspective to provide a researcher with an expanded view of a social phenomenon (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). In addition to writing field notes, the researcher randomly selected STF members to reflect on the content of the monthly STF meetings. At the end of each monthly STF meeting, the researcher asked one STF member per meeting to describe the meeting and his/her reactions to the STF meeting, into a tape recorder. The reflections were guided by the following four topics: (a) Who attended the meeting? (b) Who led the meeting? (c) What happened at the meeting? (d) What changes did you see from last meeting? These questions were typed on a sheet of paper and handed to the STF member who agreed to provide his/her reflection. The taped reflections were collected at the following meeting, transcribed, and analyzed.

Interviews. In-depth interviews allow a researcher to understand the details of individuals' experiences from their own perspectives (Seidman, 1991). Interviewing

“provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of . . . behavior” (Seidman, 1991, p. 4). In this study, two in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 of the STF members. The first set of interviews, conducted in October and November 1999, had two foci: (a) STF members’ initial perceptions of the STF and (b) STF members’ beliefs about inclusion and students with disabilities. The second set of interviews, conducted in May 2000, focused solely on STF members’ perceptions of the STF and its impact on inclusion.

For each interview, the researcher designed an interview guide that specified topics and areas for discussion, however the sequence and wording flowed in a conversational manner throughout each interview session (see Appendix B). To allow participants to voice opinions about the school context and reform, the questions were open ended. Though there was a set of specified topics and sample questions, the interviewees were not directed to specific opinions, attitudes, or conclusions related to any topic. In this way, the interviews provided a deeper understanding of the STF members’ perceptions on the initiative. The interview guide provided a systematic way to collect information while allowing flexibility and encouraging a relaxed conversational style (Spradley, 1979).

All interviews occurred in either the STF member’s classroom, office, or work center. Each interview was audiotape recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to 160 minutes, depending on the participant.

Artifacts. Artifacts are objects created within a culture that can be studied to gain knowledge of that culture (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Artifacts are items that represent meaning when considered within the cultural context. Artifacts of ancient civilizations



could include cooking and hunting implements; items placed in time capsules are also examples of artifacts. Artifacts collected in this study included (a) agendas of meetings, self-assessment and planning tools including Planning Alternative Tomorrow with Hope (PATH), internal memos, school newsletters, parent information, and community news articles. These artifacts were analyzed for their content as it pertained to the characteristics of the reform initiative, development of the role of the task force in the initiative, and relationship among STF members. These artifacts also provided further information related to the task force members' understanding of inclusion and their perceptions of reform.

### Data Analysis

The interview transcripts, reflections of STF members, field notes from STF meetings, and relevant artifacts were entered into a computer program, The Ethnograph. This software program assisted in the ethnographic data analysis process. As described by Spradley (1980), data were given a preliminary classification upon collection. Each statement was analyzed and the content assigned appropriate codes (i.e., interpretive labels). These codes were used as headings for pieces of data that pertained to a specific topic. For example, if a participant made the statement, "the principal needs to make allowances for all the extra work this change requires of me," this statement could be listed under a code for "necessary support from the principal."

After this initial classification, a taxonomical analysis was conducted. This analysis organized the sets of codes into broader categories called domains. Using the previous example of "necessary supports from the principal," this code might be included under the domain of "necessary supports for inclusion." Third, during the componential

analysis phase, the relationships among the different domains were examined and clarified.

The final step in qualitative data analysis is to discover cultural themes. This is an expansion of the taxonomical analysis. During this phase, the philosophies of the STF members, the relationships among STF members, and the activities completed by the STF were compared and contrasted to each other and to the characteristics of reforming school systems found in the literature. These cultural themes and their relationship to the literature are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Though these steps are described in a linear fashion for purposes of this report, the qualitative data analysis process was ongoing throughout the study. Each step constantly refined the analysis of the data and researcher's interpretations of those data.

### Limitations

#### Investigator Biases and Assumptions

Since the qualitative researcher serves as the main research tool, the biases, and assumptions of the researcher can have a profound bias on the investigation (Merriam, 1988). The philosophical orientation of the researcher regarding inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings, and her previous experiences as a special education teacher of students with severe disabilities in general education and special education settings may have influenced her interpretation of the data. Potential biases in this study included the researcher's different level of interaction with specific STF members. Because the researcher was involved as a participant observer, she had many interactions with some of the school task force members and larger school community beyond the school task force meetings. As such, the researcher may have

viewed certain members of the STF more positively because of their ability to articulate their ideas and reflect on the process. These assumptions could have affected the field note collection or the depth of interview discussions.

In this study, researcher bias was accounted for in several ways. Documentation of method along with records of field notes reduced the potential for selective recording in collecting and analyzing data. Triangulation is the process of collecting and examining data from a variety of sources (Spradley, 1979). This technique enriched the researcher's perspective and limited the possibility of researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, the researcher used the reflections of STF members to triangulate her field notes of the STF meetings. Interviews from STF members with a range of view points assisted in triangulation and reducing possible researcher bias.

The researcher's continued presence created a relationship with STF members that made it easier to gather "trustworthy" data (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). The level of trust between a researcher and research participants determines the level of sensitive information, the accuracy, and candidness of the participants' responses. Often the researcher was included as another member of the community, and STF members talked candidly about themselves and their perceptions of their work environments as the STF evolved within the school reform initiative.

### Ethical Issues

The ethical principles adopted by the American Anthropological Association guided the researcher throughout the study (Spradley, 1980). University of Florida Institutional Review Board (i.e., IRB) approval was received for this study (see Appendix A). Permission to attend, participate in, and record the discussions and actions of all STF

meetings was obtained. District and school administration approved and cooperated in the completion of this study. All STF members had full knowledge of the study's purpose and voluntarily participated. At the beginning of each interview research participants received, discussed, and signed a letter of consent. At no time were participants coerced to continue in the interviews or STF meetings. Because of the small number of participants in the study, complete confidentiality was not possible in reporting the results of this study. Care was taken to ensure that the participants' identities were protected as completely as possible. Because of the researcher's relationships with the members of the STF, it was important to continually clarify that any information shared could be removed from the data if they perceived that information to be too sensitive. During interviews, the tape recorder was shut off at school task force member's request if they felt uncomfortable divulging sensitive information.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

In Chapter 3, the development of cultural themes was discussed. In Chapter 4 the cultural themes and the relationship of the themes to one another are described. After a brief introduction of the context of the school at the beginning of this study, each theme discovered in this study is described. These themes no longer are named the generic “themes” but henceforth are referred to as key variables critical to reform to provide a deeper understanding of how these specific themes fit into the school reform effort. The relationship of these key variables critical to reform (i.e., themes) to the current literature and implication for researchers and practitioners is discussed in Chapter 5.

#### Introduction

Before the creation of the School Task Force (STF), professionals at Perseverance Elementary School worked in a context of isolation. The members of this school community did not meet to exchange ideas about their practices. There was no communication regarding student needs or the ways student needs were being met. For example, one teacher, in her first interview explained,

I think right now, the biggest problem I'm hearing from the teachers and the special education teachers is lack of time to sit down enough. I mean that's the biggest thing. I'll be honest with you, I find it hard to even spend time with my aide. Because she gets here and there's a knock at the door and then we've got students. So I know where they're coming from. There's no time. (BR1/153)

One first-grade teacher was frustrated with the lack of communication between herself and the special education teacher who supported students in her class. She did not know how to work with the students with learning disabilities and explained,

The assistant said I need to modify for the kids. I'm really confused about that. I'm real black and white. I want someone to sit down with me. To tell me do it this way because I don't know if I'm doing it right or wrong. I could be doing it all wrong. I don't know. And do it, help, I mean she just buzzed in and buzzed out. But usually it's just in the hall. She doesn't talk to me, they just come out and go. There's no feedback. (JF1/12234)

A special education teacher described her frustration with a lack of planning time by explaining,

Because the hardest part of co-teaching for inclusion children is finding the time to plan. I'm sort of a veteran teacher and can fly by the seat of my pants pretty well. . . . I think we can do a good job, but I think we could do a much better job with some planning and time to talk about stuff. (BB1/12977)

She continued,

This is the type of position I've always wanted because I am a good resource. I'm very good at adaptations and modifications. So I touch a lot of teachers and a lot of kids within the day, and I like to be able to spread the wealth and give them suggestions and ideas. But there's not enough time to do it. (BB1/415349)

In these examples, professionals with different roles in the building all expressed a common concern, these common concerns were a type of informal self-assessment. The STF members were frustrated due to the lack of time for adults to plan or even talk about instructional practices, student needs, or the ways supports were provided. When members of a school community are not afforded the opportunity to discuss their current practices, reforming these practices is nearly impossible. The conversation about what to change or how to change can only occur after there is discussion about what is currently happening.

### Developing Processes for Reform

The principal invited several parents, and the district administrator, and encouraged a teacher from each grade level to join the STF. In addition, before the initial STF meeting, the creation of the group was announced, and all interested faculty and staff were invited to participate. No structure was provided for the group's purpose or boundaries beyond the initial explanation that the STF was a group to improve inclusion at the school. Not surprisingly, members were uncertain of the STF's purpose and their role as task force members. However, the STF provided a regular meeting time for professionals and parents to exchange ideas about school practices related to inclusion. This regular contact and discussion helped STF members to move from a context of isolation to greater collaboration. As a professional community, the STF was limited only in that it did not include all members of the school community; rather, it was a representative sample of the community. Nevertheless, this limited professional community provided a context to develop four key variables critical to reform. These included (a) engaging in professional dialogue regarding student needs, (b) developing professional relationships, (c) developing a shared vision to direct reform efforts, and (d) shared decision making. Each of these key variables represented an important aspect of professional community and a significant step toward increasing the supportive inclusion of students with disabilities.

### Professional Dialogue Regarding Student Needs

During STF meetings, members of the school community discussed every student from each grade level who was either receiving special education services or those general education students who were in need of greater levels of support. In this way, the

STF members developed a greater understanding of the students they were educating, their needs, and the ways support was being provided. For example, one special education teacher said,

I think that from the very first when we identified students, that was our first step. Yeah, I think we've done a good job this year. . . . I really think it benefits the students, it makes them better but the teachers too, because I think they are realizing these students aren't cut from the same mold, each one's unique. (BR2/253)

Similarly, a second-grade teacher said,

Well, the point is to work through some of the problems and to find strategies to help with inclusion students and to work together to kind of brainstorm and come up with solutions and to find out what is really happening in the school and with the students. (KS2/210)

Later, she added,

We actually sat down and went through every child. I mean that was something everyone felt very good about. We became more aware of the children in the school and what their needs were. So that was a really good thing that came of that . . . more awareness throughout the whole school, so it has been very beneficial. (KS2/1625)

This discussion of student needs and the ways supports were provided was essential to reform. To change practices, it is first necessary to know what is being done; then, the discussions about change can occur. Shared knowledge about student needs was an important milestone on the way to reform.

### Developing Professional Relationships

In contrast to the historic lack of professional interaction at the school, STF members commented enthusiastically about professional collegiality that developed over the year. In addition to a forum for understanding student needs, the STF meetings were a



mechanism that brought community members together and provided the setting for the development of professional relationships.

The STF brought school community members together on a monthly basis. These ongoing interactions increased communication among the members. Many of the STF members previously had felt isolated and unaware of what was happening in the rest of the school and were frustrated working individually to meet student needs. One special education teacher expressed the change in her professional relationships in this way:

It was definitely a struggle in my fourth-grade classroom. [The teacher] wanted nothing to do with me other than as an assistant. I was to correct papers, and I wasn't going to sit back. That was a struggle. But knowing that we got over it, and at the task force we were able to talk through it. And I was able to voice my opinion. It's really come together, and now she's not spreading those negative vibes. And now she's saying, 'Wow! I really work.' Spreading positive things rather than negative things. (LD2/1125)

A first-grade teacher expressed a similar sentiment when she said,

I think I see more as we've gone along over the year. People are opening up more, the very beginning and myself included wasn't saying too much you know. But I still feel we just have to know each other, we can't agree 100% but at least we have some ideas now about each other (JF2/5332). . . . It used to be they're over there [referring to the special education support personnel], and we're over here [referring to general education teachers]. You know we just share the same facilities, but you know, this brings the staff together, to get them to interact and know each other. (JF2/88907)

This teacher concluded,

I've enjoyed it, the last couple of times. The first couple of times I'm like, 'Oh man, I don't know.' And now, but I'm getting more and more things and talking more to [special education teacher] now and to [special education paraprofessional] and to bring up different things, it has been a lot better. (JF2/95600)

Interacting and beginning to understand each other as professionals was one step in developing professional relationships. Professional relationships differed from the personal friendships many teachers had developed. These professional relationships

centered around common concern for their students and were strengthened by discussion about their teaching. Yet, even after STF members developed relationships, many were still uncomfortable participating in professional dialogue that centered around their own beliefs about student needs, teaching practices, and the school. It felt too risky for them to voice opinions in front of a large group of individuals who had different roles at the school. However, as each grade level of students was discussed, the teachers from that grade level led the meeting. This shared responsibility for providing information and facilitating discussion made many STF members feel more comfortable in expressing their knowledge and ideas. By assuming the leadership role and facilitating discussions, members recognized that they indeed had important insights, expertise, and experience. One fourth-grade teacher explained her increased comfort in participating during STF meetings:

[At first I thought] I know nothing. I don't want to go. I was so nervous, and I think that's what happens with a lot of teachers . . . [they think] I don't know anything about that, I don't want to know anything about it. I don't want to stick my foot in my mouth and say something stupid so I just won't go. But, in the meetings it was okay. I talked and it was okay. (CN2/8897)

An important part of developing professional relationships was the opportunity for all STF members to become confident about participating in professional dialogue.

An administrator explained,

Yeah, I think in the beginning a lot of . . . general ed [teachers weren't talking, but now] I see a lot of them being a little bit more [assertive] with their feelings. They feel more comfortable talking about . . . what's best for kids. And that's probably the biggest change, is the general ed giving their opinions. (DK2/334)

A special education teacher explained her perceptions of increased participation in this way:

I think we all had a say. I think we all had our input and we all had our fair share to discuss things. And if an issue was brought up, I think we were all able to give our opinions. So I mean that was, I think, quite fair. (JB2/3445)

Time spent together, discussions about student needs, development of professional relationships, and confident participation by all STF members made the task force a strong vehicle for reform. When members of a school community develop confidence in participating in professional dialogue, they will be more likely to continue to talk and ask questions when the topics get more complex or controversial, exactly the types of conversations that occur during school reform.

### Moving Toward a Shared Vision of Teaching and Learning

The school task force played an important role in developing a direction for reform efforts, since it provided a context in which participants could develop a shared vision and act on that vision. In a community where teachers had never before had professional discussions, they had no common vision and no idea what the role of the STF would become. As they came together and discussed students, supports, and practices, they began to realize their single common goal, educating children. Gradually, STF members became more aware of this commonality and were better able to articulate their common vision. The shared vision developed over time and served as a catalyst for action aimed at achieving the vision. Interestingly, it was not until later in the process that STF members realized the importance shared vision has on a developing reform effort, and that the time and structure provided by the STF allowed this vision to develop. Each of these steps in the process of developing a shared vision is described below by STF members.

An administrator described the initial stages of STF development. In the following quote, he describes STF members' lack of clarity about their roles and the purpose of the STF:

Well, I'm not sure if a whole lot of people knew what they were doing at the beginning of the year. I think they committed to a task force for inclusion because I think philosophically they believed in it, or at the very least they were curious about it. But I don't think anybody really had a mission, or anybody had a feel for what that meant as far as committing to what they needed to do. (RR2/366)

As the STF members continued to meet and discuss inclusion, some members noted a change in the reactions of fellow faculty members toward inclusion. There was a greater interest in discussing and planning for students, including those with disabilities. One special education teacher described the changes in some of her fellow faculty members when she said,

I can see . . . some teachers who I thought a couple years ago, no way, they'll never do it. And now, they are actually coming around, coming to meetings and planning. . . . People that I thought would never do that. You know they are coming around. (KRI2/332)

A second special education teacher echoed these same sentiments. She said,

Yeah, and I think most of us are on the same page. Even the ones that I felt less, like J, just coming into it. I think she even tends to understand more now. I talk to these people now, and it seems like we are on the same page.

One general education teacher on the STF, who had previously felt extremely reluctant to work with students with disabilities, explained her change in position in teaching children with disabilities:

Well, they are in my room now. Before now, I don't ever think I had one. And this inclusion thing, I'm working towards it. And I have no problem with it, as long as I see it in other places, too. You know, I think it's going to be a long process, the group has really started me thinking and to understand, they're just kids and I'm just one teacher, we'll all work together and learn. I think we have come a long way. (JF2/112)

A second-grade teacher explained changes in STF members' understandings in this way:

I think inclusion is definitely trickling in. I think there are far more kids included now than even last year. And I think that more teachers are less nervous, some more are even volunteering to co-teach. More think they should teach any kid, or at least try it. I think we are moving from your kids and my kids to our kids. (SD2/2543)

In these last quotes, the beginnings of an inclusive philosophy becomes apparent. Several members articulated the STF's developing shared vision of all teachers working together to educate all students:

The way I feel and from what I gather from the other people is that we believe that these are all our children, each and every one, and we're here to teach all children, any type, any kind. They belong to this school and we can teach all of them together. (BB2/8765)

A building administrator contrasted the attitude of faculty at other schools toward inclusion with his own faculty's views, reiterating the STF's emerging vision. He said,

You know, I hear about a lot of stuff at other schools, just lots of complaining about having special needs students in inclusion settings. And not that we don't have our problems, but you know, you don't hear it. I think we are here for all kids, and that's our philosophy here, so I think that's what makes it good. (DK2/9097)

He then reflected on his faculty's view of the common vision of the school by saying,

I think philosophically teachers know what direction we are going. Teachers know inclusion is here to stay. We believe all teachers teach all kids and that's it. I think they need to know that this is our school's philosophy, and those that are here agree with it.

As this common vision emerged, STF members noted the impact a common vision had on the STF and movement toward reform. As highlighted in the comments below, many members emphasized the importance of having a common vision. When asked about the effect of the school task force, a building administrator replied,

I think that's huge. I think that the task force helps drive where we are going. That group meeting every month meeting keeps us focused. They are talking and

taking us to the next step, and keep us on our path, and where we are going. I think the task force is the key to moving the program forward. (DK2/1476)

In response to the question, "What is the purpose of the school task force?" a special education teacher replied, "To probably get us on the same team. Thinking on the same page. How to best serve the special ed. students in the classroom. It's time to talk about change" (LD 2/1008).

A district administrator on the STF reiterated the importance of a unifying philosophy: "So I really feel like the information that is disseminated among people at these meetings is important for everybody, and I think philosophically that there was a need for us all to be there" (RR1/6119).

Similarly, the building administrator commented about philosophy, and the role of the STF in its development:

I think the task force is extremely important. I like the make up of the team. It drives the philosophy to all the teachers about special needs kids. It gets everyone to understand where we are going. You know, it's the philosophy, but it's applying it to each child that has made a difference. They see the philosophy being acted on. That's what makes the process at task force meetings vital. It's neat to see, I mean, you know we even got some of these tough nuts moving along. (DK2/14)

The building administrator's comments regarding the application of the philosophy to action was significant because it demonstrated that the STF was more than just talk. It demonstrated the effect of the STF on teaching practices. This same idea was echoed in the sentiments of one general education teacher who said,

Now we are at the end of the year, deciding what students should go to which teacher, in the hope that by the beginning of the year those teachers all have training. This is farther than we were last year, because now it's a different philosophy. I think we really do buy into that all children can learn. (LD2/9243)

Later in the same interview she said,

I think we all have the same vision, we have the philosophy set in. Hopefully now the teachers will just rise higher and higher. More people will just say, 'Hey, this is how we do it.' It's like a good virus.

During the year, the members of the STF developed a common vision. In the beginning teachers were unaware of the attitudes or beliefs of other teachers. By meeting monthly and discussing school issues they realized commonalities and came to consensus regarding their vision. This is not to say that the work of constructing a common vision was finished. Their common vision was still general, "educating all children." The precise meaning of that statement and its impact on practices are yet to be determined. Nevertheless, it appeared that their newly gained common vision coupled with the STF's emergent skill of shared decision making would assist them in reaching their goals.

#### Developing Shared Decision Making

Shared decision making is the process of taking action based on the consensus of the school community rather than a single leader being responsible for all decisions. At the beginning of the year, STF members described the school decision making process as inconsistent and haphazard. By the end of the year, their perceptions of the process had changed dramatically. They perceived decisions were being made based on STF input and that those decisions were aligned with the shared vision of the STF. The STF members were growing to trust that their views made a difference in the decision making process.

The school administrator, well-liked as a person, was initially perceived by STF members as having inconsistent views and basing administrative decisions on his

concerns about his own popularity. The STF members interpreted the administrator's lack of decisiveness as a need to feel liked:

[He's] a good ole boy, he wants to be liked. Everybody has to like [him]. That's how he makes decisions, whoever he can make happy. (LD1/39)

I think he's pulled himself from being a good principal, by not being anything. He doesn't want to be the bad guy. He doesn't want to say, 'You're going to take this kid, you don't have a choice.' He just wants to be everybody's friend. (KD1/48)

STF members believed that the school administrator was determined to maintain his status as a well-liked professional. Consequently, he made decisions based on what he believed the teachers in the school wanted. However, since there was no shared view of what was best for the school, he frequently changed his decisions as he interacted with teachers with different outlooks. The STF members' perceptions of the administrator caused them not to trust him to follow through on plans. They further believed that his decisions were not final; that is, even when he did follow through on a plan, he might change his mind and undo any progress that they felt had been made.

In contrast, the administrator perceived that he empowered the school community to guide the school. He described a method of decision making based on getting input from school community members in an informal way. Essentially, he chatted with teachers as he encountered them during the day. As there was no formal way for the school community to gather and make decisions, the administrator based decisions on multiple, individual conversations with faculty members. This method, though intended to be democratic, led to an inconsistency in decision making and a perception that some teachers' views were more valued than others. Once the STF became a vehicle to develop consensus among the school community members about their educational vision, the administrator's decisions were more informed, aligned with the entire community's



vision, and received in a much more positive light. That is, the school moved to a more systematic method of decision making based on the shared vision being formulated in the STF.

Just as STF members perceived a change in the way school decisions were made, they came to see the administrator in a new light. Initially, many STF members voiced their concern that one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the reform effort was a lack of administrative leadership and support. This lack of perceived support actually led some STF members to wish they had an authoritarian leader:

I think that is a part of why we still are sitting on the start line. We still don't have a lot of things in place that need to be in place and had we had strong administrative support who would carry things through we would be a lot further ahead. It's just not there. (KD1/12)

I think his role should be, I want to say authoritative. I'm going to say authoritative. He should be the person that says this school is going to take inclusion, this is our mission, this is where we want to go with it. This is what the task force is here for, and I will support you. (KD1/39)

Some viewed the school administrator's initial leadership style as evidence of a lack of competence and awareness of his school's needs:

I think [the principal's] role is to know what's going on in the school and to know what is going to be best for kids. That doesn't come in a dream or sitting at a computer. It's something that needs to be worked out. I think if he recognizes the importance of the task force, he'll have his finger on the pulse of [our school]. I think he needs to attend all the meetings. I think he needs to give the impression that there's help out there. He needs to let the faculty know what he believes and that he is willing to do his part. I don't think he can just show up at every third meeting, tell the teachers to plan the meeting and let me know how it turns out. I think he needs to be involved first hand because there is nothing more frustrating than to find out in December that this has been in place for two months and it is floundering, and he doesn't know anything about it. (RR1/23)

Other STF members viewed the school administrator's lack of consistent decision making as evidence of his fear of being wrong or being blamed for failed attempts at school improvement:

I think [he] is supportive and open minded to let things happen. I think he is torn in different directions. [The administrator] is supportive and willing to hear it, but he wants someone else to take the lead, and the fall if that happens. (LD1/541)

Regardless of the STF members' views of the causes for their administrator's behavior, STF members unanimously agreed that his lack of consistent leadership was hindering the efforts to improve the school:

He doesn't have any follow through. It's the person who talks to him last, that's who he believes next. He changes like the wind. We start stuff but can't depend on him to stick with any decision. (BB1/9902)

In contrast to the STF members' perceptions, the administrator viewed his decision-making as being based on shared power. He did not describe any issues related to inconsistent decision making or lack of support for faculty. Though STF members' perceptions of the school administrator changed drastically during the year, the administrator's description of his leadership style remained unchanged. The following are excerpts from interviews with the principal at the beginning and end of the year, describing his view of leadership:

You don't want an aggressive person up there driving the whole thing. I on purpose stay back, because I'm principal and I don't want to drive, I think all of our decisions need to be a team decision, and I think we do a pretty good job of that. (DK2/17)

Well, I feel like all of the teachers feel like they need my support if we are going to do any program changes. I give my input on program changes, student input but I don't, I mean I don't sometimes I have my own ideas about how things need to be run. They run the budget stuff by me and want to know if we need an additional teacher assistant or a lot of numbers in a certain area, what kind of support are we going to get. That's my job to get with district and work those issues through for them, but I guess I am there to bounce off a lot of questions

about the support with the budget for programs. . . . I look at my role like, I don't have any [specific agenda]. I don't go in there with I want to do this, and this is the way it's going to be done and that's the way we are going to drive it. I just think that the people sitting around that table are very professional, and you know I'm wide open to any suggestions they may have. I mean if it's ignorant I'm not going to let it happen, but it's a good bunch of people that really care about kids. (DK2 697)

The building administrator believed school community members had the best interest of all students in mind and perceived his role as a team facilitator throughout the year. However, his attempts at allowing the school community to make decisions only began to be effective once the community was given the opportunity to gather and discuss a planned course of action. The STF provided this context. Before the STF, the building administrator had no group consensus, so his attempts at shared decision making led to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory outcomes.

Toward the end of the year, STF members' perceptions of the administrator's style grew more positive. This change in perception may have been a response to a greater number of interactions with the administrator or a greater understanding of the way decisions were made. The changed perceptions also could have been due to changes in the administrator, as he became more involved with a group of school community members and became more aware of issues they faced as a school community. Regardless, the change in perceptions was dramatic, as demonstrated in the following quote:

And it seems like he's at least trying to get a little more follow through. He has made some administrative decisions, though. As far as the teachers having the authority to say or the willingness to say, 'I'm not going to have this kid.' He has said, 'Yeah you will, and you will co-teach, and you will provide support for those kids.' So I have to give him that piece. (KD2/33)

Though some members continued to seem a bit frustrated with the administrator's style, they still noted his willingness to work with the STF and support the group's plans:

[The administrator] likes to have things decided upon and then cleared through him and then wrapped up in a neat little package and then placed on his desk. So [his] role is to be the person who allows the team to make decisions and to look at what's best for kids, don't go too far without me though, run it by me and let me make sure I'm okay with it, but then take it back and finish it up for me. And then once it's finished and it's in a neat little package, then you can hand it to him and he supports it. I think a couple times in the meetings he's been a little surprised at what goes on as compared to what he thought was going on. So I think he's sort of a secondary member, but yet, because he is the principal, he still feels that every now and then he's got to bring out the lead pipe and make sure he knows what's going on. (RR2/40)

In response to the question, what is your school administrator's role on the STF?, one STF member said,

He likes to allow people to express their ideas, and he kinda sits back and lets them hash it out. He doesn't want to dictate. So it's probably good in a way. Like he said the other day, if we try and force it down people's throats they're not going to do it right, you've got to have them buy in. So by having his backing, hopefully it will help. (SD2/56)

Obviously you have [him], as administrator, he has pretty much the underlining statement. If we make a decision the ideas, the comments, or suggestions or whatever we feel would be most beneficial, and then he's there to say yea or nea kind of thing. (LD2/45)

And that's when the administration comes in and says, he doesn't necessarily force the person to do it, but I think he says this is why it's a good thing. And if knowledge is better to teach someone that this is the reason why, and if you don't buy into it that's okay, you will buy into it. But I'm not going to force you yet, you'll see. (LD2/139)

These quotes from STF members demonstrate their changed understanding of the building administrator's attempts at shared decision making. They realized that he was listening to the concerns, being supportive of decisions, and would guide reluctant faculty members toward the vision that the STF was developing.

Overall, the STF members moved from not trusting or feeling supported by the school administrator to believing he would do his part to help the reform efforts:

I like the way [he] is going to meet with every grade level so it's not like 'So okay this is coming from the task force.' This was our decision. It's like, we were a group, you were always informed of the meetings and could have come. It was their choice to choose not to come. And now I'm real happy that he is going to come to them and tell them because I think there are going to be some people that are concerned. And had that come all along we would be much further. He's putting some muscle behind his words. I really believe this will happen. (K2/30)

Similar to the move toward a common vision for the school, as members of the STF worked together, they began to develop an understanding of each other's views. The STF members recognized the principal's attempts at including them in the decision making process. The principal did not change his view of himself as a facilitative leader, but began to understand the importance of bringing the school community together to reach consensus rather than basing decisions on individual opinions. These new understandings reinforced relationships between the building administrator and STF members as they trusted that everyone would follow through on agreed upon actions. This trust empowered the STF to make decisions regarding school practices.

### Conditions Influencing the Development of the STF

Conditions in place at Perseverance Elementary School affected the success of the STF. Both internal and external conditions influenced the processes STF members developed and, consequently, the steps they were able to take toward school reform. There were five conditions internal to the STF that were supports or barriers and affected its success, including (a) time to collaborate, (b) parameters of membership, (c) STF leadership structure, (d) involvement of a critical friend, and (e) commitment to quality inclusion.

### Time to Collaborate

Time served as both a facilitator of, and an impediment to, STF success. The STF members voluntarily met after school one day per month. These monthly meetings provided a common time to gather, talk about students, develop professional relationships, and discuss change. In the beginning, these meetings were long (2.5 hours). The large blocks of time allowed for in-depth discussion and relationship-building among the STF members, some of whom had never worked together. However, as the year progressed, the meetings began to get shorter in duration. By January, the meetings were about 70 minutes long, and by June, only 45 minutes long. Teachers explained that although the STF was important to them, they had many other professional and personal responsibilities to attend to. Although regular meetings helped make change possible, shorter meetings posed a problem. The decreasing length of meetings meant less time for discussion. As a result, significant discussions had to be distributed over several meetings, thus slowing the reform effort.

### Parameters for Membership

At the beginning of the year the school administrator asked at least one member of each grade level and all of the special education teachers to be STF members. He also asked one parent of a special education student and one general education teacher to lead the task force. After this initial invitation, all members of the school community were invited to join the school task force through an announcement at the end of the day before the first meeting. By using this approach the principal hoped that STF membership would be voluntary and all the grade levels would be represented. Representation of all grade

levels was critical to increasing participation in the reform effort. Since the communication among school community members was initially minimal, it was necessary to have all grade levels involved so the reform agenda could move forward in all parts of the school community. In addition, by opening the STF to anyone interested in attending, no school community members felt they lacked a voice in decision making.

### STF Leadership Structure

In the beginning of the year, the principal chose two co-facilitators to get the STF underway: one general education teacher and one district employee who had two children with disabilities attending Perseverance Elementary School. These two members arranged the meeting space, scheduled the meetings, and advertised the group meetings on the school's daily announcements. For the first meeting, they developed an agenda and facilitated the group's activities.

After the first few meetings, the co-facilitators had less leadership responsibility as they had assigned tasks to different STF members. Those STF members then reported task progress at the following meeting, and the group made suggestions regarding next steps.

In this way, the STF became a group without permanent leaders. The meeting date for the next month was determined at the end of each meeting. In general, this shared responsibility created a strong sense of ownership of the reform effort among the STF members. One member described the shared participation:

I'd say it typically varies. If on the agenda we're looking at primarily where the students are and where they need to be placed, then the typical grade level and ESE teachers kinda dominate the discussion. If it tends to be more based on district issues then I tend to take over for awhile. If it's something about best

practices, you speak up. I've not gotten the sense that anybody facilitates or directs or leads it. I think it's very open and equitable. (RR2)

Although shared ownership facilitated the work of the STF, there was sometimes confusion about who was responsible for completing tasks. Since the group shared responsibilities, no specific STF member took responsibility for scheduling meetings, recording minutes of the STF meetings, or clarifying what was to be accomplished by the next meeting. A district administrator explained the planning process:

Typically, we plan the next meeting at the previous, when we are sitting at the meeting we do plan a date to come up. I will say that there isn't a whole lot of process involved for reiterating that or reminding people it is coming up. However, up until now, I don't think it's affecting attendance too badly. . . . That would be one thing we could work on a little bit more next year . . . somehow reminding the members, as far as getting emails out or an agenda or minutes or something like that. (RR2)

This lack of organization caused some problems for the STF. Another STF member, in response to the question, 'How would you know what occurred if you missed a task force meeting?' explained,

I write down my own notes at meetings and save them. But I don't know, if I missed one, I don't know . . . there's no follow up like written thing. I guess I'd go ask someone, but they'd probably just say, 'It was the same like what we talked about the other day.' It's amazing we keep moving! (JF2)

We go to the meetings, that's the only way we know. You don't hear from what the meeting was about. But that's just kinda how it is. If you want to know, go to the meeting. (BB2)

The lack of leadership that was described in the previous quote is typified in the following event. On one occasion, scheduling the meeting became so confusing that the meeting almost failed to take place. First, a teacher arranged for a room for the STF meeting, writing "inclusion meeting" in the scheduling book. When the school administrator saw this meeting scheduled, he announced that the meeting had been



cancelled since it would conflict with the timing of the task force meeting. After this announcement, he erased "inclusion meeting" and wrote "STF meeting" in the schedule book, when in reality, these were the same event. When the members realized what had happened, they laughed. However, they did not use the incident to facilitate a discussion of STF structure, leadership, or planning. Leadership structure of the STF was fluid and shared. This was a support to the STF because it increased ownership of tasks but was also a hindrance because it caused confusion and lack of communication.

### Involvement of a Critical Friend

As described in Chapter 3, a university partnership provided a critical friend to assist in reflection about school practices regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities. The researcher in this study acted as that critical friend, asking questions and clarifying decisions during STF meetings. The presence of the critical friend was positive because she assisted the task force in clarifying its direction and proposed action. Although there is the potential for a critical friend to have a negative influence on a reform process, there was no evidence that this was the case. The presence of a critical friend could have been an obstacle to reform since the position was externally imposed and might have been perceived as an intrusion, impeding honest reflection about current practices. There was the potential for members to worry that if they said negative things about inclusion or their practices, their comments would be shared with district administration or the university community. However, at no time was there any evidence that the presence of the critical friend was a barrier to open participation on the STF or to reform of inclusion at Perseverance Elementary.

### Commitment to Quality Inclusion

Since Perseverance Elementary was a cluster site, all teachers had previous experience with students with disabilities. Teachers who were uncomfortable with children with disabilities would not stay long at Perseverance Elementary since it served a high percentage of such students. Regardless of a teacher's official class list, he or she interacted with students with disabilities on a daily basis. Although many teachers had not had students with disabilities as members of their class, they interacted with these students in other settings, including lunch, recess, and school assemblies.

As a result of their familiarity with students with disabilities and their commitment to Perseverance Elementary, the teachers on the STF all supported the philosophy of high quality inclusion. Since STF members were united in their support of inclusion, the group had a strong foundation from which to examine school practices and consider change. However, there were differences among STF members, and these differences promoted lively discussion. In particular, some members voiced concerns that greater inclusion of students with disabilities should only be considered when a stronger base of support was available for students and teachers. Because some STF members were concerned about including students without adequate supports the group moved quickly to discussing support needs.

There were three conditions present at this elementary school and external to the STF that affected its success including (a) the professional culture of the school, (b) administrative support, and (c) the presence of expert consultants.

### Professional Culture of the School

The lack of professional relationships at Perseverance Elementary was a hindrance to developing the STF. Since teachers were isolated, they did not know their peers' philosophy about education or what practices they used in the classroom. It took time during STF meetings to share this information and for STF members to recognize commonalities among the members. Had the school culture been more collaborative, the STF may have been able to move more quickly to define their vision and take steps to achieve that vision.

As the year progressed, STF members became aware of their progress toward creating a collaborative community. The increased collaboration among members was a definite boost to the school's reform efforts in that the members were able to move confidently toward changes in school practice. These sentiments are emphasized in the following quote:

You know the one thing I was impressed at yesterday, is when the team had sat down last month to identify which child goes where, and they worked really hard to make those decisions. And then one particular teacher called and made three or four changes and when those changes were presented yesterday the team was somewhat taken aghast by somebody that thought they would be able to make simple changes like that after a team of dedicated people did what they thought was best. And that was backed by [the school administrator]. And I think the biggest gain they've probably made is their ability to work as a team to create some ideas as a team and then stand pat on the decisions that they made that was what best meets the kids' needs. (RR2/2098)

The preceding quote describes STF members' strong sense of unity and ownership of decisions. This confidence and sense of team is quite a dramatic difference from the context of isolation that was present at the inception of the STF.

### Administrative Support

The STF had both building level and district level administrative support. The building administrator demonstrated his support of the STF in several ways. First, he identified two professionals to lead the STF. Then, in collaboration with these two original facilitators, he played a key role in determining initial STF membership. They discussed which teachers, related service personnel, and parents should be invited to participate on the STF. The school administrator and two original facilitators decided that the rest of the school community would receive an open invitation to join the STF. The school administrator maintained his support throughout the year by attending at least a portion of every STF meeting and following through with the STF's decisions regarding reform efforts.

The presence of district support was critical to the STF's success. There were two members of the task force who had district level positions. These members provided communication between the STF and district administration regarding training opportunities, funding for personnel, and the alignment of the STF vision with the district philosophy of inclusion. These members became advocates when the STF needed district level support to begin sending students from other school zones back to the home zone schools.

### The Presence of Expert Consultants

In addition to the presence of one critical friend on the STF, there were two expert consultants working with Perseverance Elementary to improve instructional practices that increased the inclusion of students with disabilities. The expert consultants, though representing different state agencies, worked collaboratively to provide hands-on

workshops and in class consultation for general education teachers who had included students with disabilities. The presence of these expert consultants was valued by many STF members as providing necessary information and models of best practice for teaching students with disabilities in general education classes. As one member said,

I think I always find [expert consultant]'s workshops to be very useful. I always come away with something. I enjoy them, that's why I always say to people, 'Go to this workshop because you'll come away with something.' That I think has been helpful. We are comfortable moving to it because we have people to help us with what it will look like. (SD2)

As described in the previous quote, the presence of the expert consultants was a support to the STF since many members were more comfortable increasing inclusive practices with the expert consultants' assistance and expertise. The expert consultants helped school personnel develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence they needed to embrace inclusion.

### Steps Toward Reform

A variety of conditions played a role in the evolution of the STF. While some conditions impeded the work of the STF, others facilitated the development of four processes critical to reform, including (a) engaging in professional dialogue regarding student needs, (b) developing professional relationships, (c) developing a shared vision, and (d) shared decision making. Through the use of these four processes, the STF made some steps toward reform. The two areas in which reform occurred were providing supports for inclusion and planning to educate students in their home zone school (i.e., the school they would attend if they did not have a disability). The steps taken in both areas had the potential to impact significantly the education of students at Perseverance Elementary.

### Providing Supports for Inclusion

The process of discussing student needs, as described previously, helped the STF members understand the planning and supports required to include students with disabilities. They believed the information gained from this process helped them make three important changes in practice. First, the information smoothed transitions between grade levels. Second, it provided staff ample time to plan or seek training opportunities. Finally, it led to a closer examination of the ways school community members worked together to meet student needs. The following comments, from a teacher and a parent, illustrate STF members' views of these three changes in providing supports for inclusion:

Things we [identified in the beginning of the year as priority issues] should or hopefully are decided on for next year. . . . For instance now we are at the end of the year, we are deciding what students, or what ESE students, will be in what teachers class with what match-up with how many students, are they ability based or based on whatever like [teacher and] class personality. . . . So, by the beginning of the year, hopefully that will all be in place and we can have a sufficient amount of training provided for both the general as well as the ESE teacher in collaboration rather than just going in cold turkey. Which, you know I think we have been going that route okay, here, those are your students and yeah I'm going to pull them out. But now it's a different philosophy. We know we are going in to review how well can we get along and how well can we learn from each other. (LD2/11)

Well, last year they realigned their staff a little bit, and I think they'll probably do that a little more this year in order to provide more services to more kids. I think just looking at each kid's individual needs assessment is a big first step for them. Especially to do it in May and not wait until August, and try to have all those pieces worked out before school's even out. You know what kids are going where and how are we going to provide support for them. (RR2/238)

These quotes demonstrate an optimistic attitude from STF members about the school's attempts to include students with disabilities. The STF members believed they would receive greater support before students with disabilities being placed in their classes and continued support once the students were included. This increased support

made STF members more willing collaborators in the inclusion of students with disabilities; they felt they were being informed, had a voice, and could work together to support all students. As STF members gained knowledge and collaborated to develop the supports needed to successfully include students with disabilities, they also became more aware of the barriers to providing them. The following section describes the STF's progress in overcoming one substantial barrier to successfully including students with disabilities.

### Educating Students in Their Home Zone Schools

As a result of the student assessment process, STF members realized the effects of being a cluster site and educating so many students from out of their home school zone. A cluster site is a school that houses programs and provides supports for all students in the district with a specific disability (e.g., autism). This elementary school was a cluster site for students with autism, young children with disabilities, and students with emotional disorders. Cluster sites by definition have an unusually large number of students with disabilities on campus. This arrangement is problematic in a school hoping to achieve inclusion because there is an unnatural proportion of students with disabilities, and it overwhelms the general education settings. For example, in a typical school the percentage of students with disabilities is 10% or 11%, but in a cluster site there can be 30% or 40% of the student population classified as having disabilities. When this large percentage of students enters the general education classroom, there are not enough role models for social and academic behavior to maintain the classroom as a positive learning environment. In addition, STF members discovered there were some students whose home zone school was Perseverance Elementary but who were bused to another school

due to their disability label. To achieve their vision of educating all students, the STF members realized they needed to serve all of the students for whom Perseverance Elementary was the community school. They concluded that to include such a high percentage of students with disabilities would not benefit any of the students since they would not receive appropriate support or have enough peer models.

The STF members determined that it was a priority for students to attend their home zone school. Two events occurred that helped move the school toward achieving this goal. First, the school gained district support to begin returning students to their home zone school. District level support occurred because of external events in the district, but also because the principal and district administrator on the STF advocated for the change. This district support enabled Perseverance Elementary to turn away new out of zone students seeking programs housed on their campus. Similarly, it served as a catalyst for other home schools to look at developing appropriate services for their own students. Second, the topic of returning out of zone students to their home zone school was addressed at all IEP meetings. By holding these conversations, the Perseverance Elementary staff initiated the process of returning students to their home zone schools. The following statements describe the STF members' perceptions of their movement toward the goal of placing all students in their home zone school:

The home school piece, we are really trying to keep the kids that we have. We're working slowly on trying to send kids [back] to their home school. Dealing with that on an individual basis, you know, per child. I think that [our school] has stopped being the statue of liberty and taking all your tired, and weary, and hungry, and poor. We took a big step on that, it's like no, no more. You need to develop your own program at your own school. (CD2/5978)

I have seen [that] each teacher and each person on that faculty is starting to take a look at home school as a much more viable option than they used to. I think that they know that because they feel supported at the district level and so now we



stop and think, 'Where should that kid really go?' I think people are now beginning to say, 'What do we need to do differently on our campus so kids are where they should be?' (RR2/878)

When we first started the placement of students at [x school], being [x school] students was always a big issue. Because we've been, I hate to say it, a dumping ground for the district . . . so that's big, and we keep fighting that and we keep pushing for us educating our kids.

The quotes illustrate the determination and enthusiasm with which STF members pursued the goal of teaching students in their home zone school. Although only in its first year, the STF had become a vehicle for facilitating significant changes in practice.

This study focused on the formation of the STF at Perseverance Elementary. During the first year, the STF was able to develop several processes that would support further reform efforts. These processes, along with internal and external conditions at Perseverance Elementary, allowed for two specific changes in practice. In the next chapter this study's findings are examined in the context of the current literature on school reform.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Supporting students with severe disabilities in inclusive general education settings requires that a collaborative support system be created. Though descriptions of collaborative support systems exist in the literature, descriptions of the reform efforts required to create these systems are not available (Fisher, Sax, & Pumpian, 1999). However, school reform literature offers insight into the components successfully reformed schools possessed, and these apply to schools that are hoping to develop a collaborative support system.

The literature in general school reform explains that school reform depends on collaborative discussions among professionals. It is necessary for schools attempting reform to develop a structure in which these collaborative discussions can occur. One collaborative structure that provides professionals with a vehicle for discussion is the school task force (STF). Since the STF is the center of collaborative discussion required to implement reform, researching the development and role of an STF in school reform efforts to increase inclusive practices is a valuable area of research. The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of an STF within a school reform effort to develop a collaborative support system for all students, including those with the most severe disabilities, in general education settings. Given the purpose of this research study, the main question addressed was as follows: How does a school task force influence school

reform efforts to include students with severe disabilities? In addition, the following secondary questions were addressed:

1. How does the school task force develop as a discussion forum?
2. What supports and barriers does the school task force encounter?
3. What effect does the school task force have on including students with severe disabilities?

The research questions were explored through the use of qualitative methods. The researcher acted as a participant observer who occasionally asked questions and provided comments during STF meetings. The researcher collected field notes and artifacts at all STF meetings and conducted interviews with each of the STF members. Field notes were collected at the eight regular STF meetings that occurred each month and one full day STF planning meeting during the 1999-2000 school year. In addition to writing field notes, the researcher randomly selected school task force members to reflect on the content of the monthly school task force meetings. At the end of each monthly school task force meeting, the researcher asked one school task force member to audiotape a description of the meeting and his or her reactions to it. These audiotaped reflections were collected at the following meeting, transcribed, and analyzed. Thirteen STF members, including representatives of special education, general education, administration, and parents were interviewed twice, once in the fall and once again at the end of the school year. The findings are the result of a thematic analysis of interviews, observation, and artifact data.

### Findings

Reform is a time intensive process; it can take years to change teachers' practices. This study examined 1 year in Perseverance Elementary's reform process. Although the STF was in the initial stages of formation and its members struggled to define their purpose, the STF took some significant steps toward reform that year. Because the answer to the main research question is complex, it is presented here through use of the three secondary questions.

#### How Did the School Task Force Develop as a Discussion Forum?

The STF acted as a discussion forum as it developed four key variables critical to reform. These included (a) engaging in professional dialogue regarding student needs, (b) developing professional relationships, (c) developing a shared vision to direct reform efforts, and (d) shared decision making. During STF meetings, members discussed every student receiving special education supports. This allowed STF members to have a deep understanding of the needs of all students at Perseverance Elementary. The time spent discussing student needs and ways support was being provided allowed STF members to develop professional relationships. Before the creation of the STF, Perseverance Elementary teachers knew little about their peers' practices or beliefs about teaching and learning.

In addition to teachers developing professional relationships, the STF allowed for interaction among constituencies (e.g., special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators, parents) that had not previously existed. Discussion among STF members and development of professional relationships was important because it led to a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of current inclusive practices.

From the discussion of inclusive practices, STF members began to solidify a common vision of education and determine initial steps toward reform. Shared decision making allowed the STF to develop this common vision, implement supports and plans to begin changing practice. For example, the STF gained district support and began plans to return students to their home zone school. This type of action might have been suggested, but would not have been possible without shared decision making.

### What Supports and Barriers Did the School Task Force Encounter?

Conditions within and external to the STF acted as both supports and barriers to the STF and, consequently, the steps they were able to take toward school reform. There were five conditions internal to the STF that affected its success, including (a) time to collaborate, (b) parameters of membership, (c) the STF leadership structure, (d) involvement of a critical friend, and (e) commitment to quality inclusion.

First, time was both a support and a barrier to the STF's success. The STF provided regular meeting time for professionals and parents to exchange ideas about school practices. This regular contact and discussion helped STF members to move from a context of isolation to greater collaboration. As the year progressed, the amount of time available to continue this collaboration decreased. Thus time became a barrier to the STF's success.

Second, the membership of the STF was an important support. The STF was limited only in that it did not include all members of the school community; rather, it was a representative sample of the community. This allowed a voice for all constituencies that promoted a sense of commitment to the process and acceptance of STF decisions. Third, the leadership of the STF was flexible and changed dependent on the task at hand. This

flexibility was both a hindrance and a support to the STF. The lack of consistent leadership created some confusion regarding tasks to be completed and did not allow for communication of meeting events to those not present at the STF meeting (i.e., absent members, non-STF school personnel). Conversely, the fluid STF leadership structure was also a support since all STF members participated in discussions and decision making. Fourth, the presence of a critical friend on the STF allowed for an external view of the school community. She asked questions that prompted STF members to examine their assumptions about inclusive practices. Additionally, the critical friend asked questions that helped the STF members see the potential effects of their decisions on the larger school community. Finally, since all STF members had some previous interaction with students with disabilities and possessed an understanding of and commitment to inclusion, the STF was able to move quickly to address issues of supports for and quality of the inclusive services rather than spending time debating the value of inclusion.

#### What Effect Did the School Task Force Have on Including Students with Severe Disabilities?

Although the original intent of the school reform effort was to improve the inclusion of students with severe disabilities, it was necessary to view the entire support system for students with any disability. Though the discussion and change efforts encompassed the entire community, students with severe disabilities were included in all discussion and change efforts. In this way, students with severe disabilities did not become a segregated category, but were included throughout the process. Due to this inclusion of the students with severe disabilities as one part of the school population,

students with severe disabilities benefited in the same way students with any level of disability benefited.

With the assistance of the supportive conditions at Perseverance Elementary and through the use of the four processes it developed, the STF took steps to change practices related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. The two areas in which practices changed were providing supports for inclusion and planning to educate students in their home zone school (i.e., the school they would attend if they did not have a disability). The steps taken in both areas had the potential to impact significantly the education of students at Perseverance Elementary.

#### Relationship of Findings to Previous Studies

According to the literature, certain key variables must be present in schools for reform to occur. In some cases, when these processes were not present it was possible for specific reform efforts to foster their development. These variables include a collaborative community, a shared vision of teaching and learning, and shared decision making. The presence of a collaborative community is necessary for school personnel to reflect on their practices and align them with the goals of the reform effort (Giles, 1998; Myers, 1997; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). A shared vision is critical for a school to reform because it provides a direction for school reform activities (Noffke, Clark, Palmeri-Santiago, Sadler, & Shujaa, 1996). Shared decision making is important because it allows school community members to develop a sense of ownership for reform efforts and it allows those most involved in the reform effort the ability to make decisions (Chelsey & Jordan, 1996; Goldman, Dunlap, & Conley, 1991; Powell & Hyle, 1997).

In contrast to the literature, these variables were not present at Perseverance Elementary before the reform, nor were specific steps taken to create these supports. This study demonstrates that when these key variables are not present in the school community before the reform initiative, the STF is a structure in which these supports can be built. For instance, STF members described a change from a context of isolation in which teachers did not share information about their practices and knew little about their colleagues' philosophy of teaching and learning to a more collaborative community in which school community members gathered to collectively reflect on their practices, examined their practices in comparison to best practice, and develop a shared vision of teaching and learning. Their shared vision, though still in a simplistic form, assisted the community members in determining initial steps toward reform.

Decision making in the school had previously been the responsibility of one school administrator. Although he attempted to gather information from individual school personnel to guide his decision making, the school had no forum for community discourse so the school administrator had to make these decisions based on the information he was able to gather. The STF provided a structured setting for discussion related to teaching practices and the inclusion of students with disabilities. Through his participation as an STF member, the school administrator discussed his ideas about teaching and learning, demonstrated his support of shared decision making, and supported the implementation of the STF's plans for reform.

In addition to variables necessary for reform, the literature identifies specific conditions internal to the STF that influenced the success of the STF as a vehicle for



school reform. These include (a) STF membership, (b) STF leadership, (c) member participation, and (d) specific activities.

STF membership is cited in the literature as critical to the reform effort (Kemp, 1996; Nicastro, 1997; Swaim, 1996). The STF membership must be balanced to represent all constituencies within a school community (e.g., administrators, general education teachers, parents, paraprofessionals) and all viewpoints present in the community. The STF at Perseverance Elementary was successful partially due to the representation of all constituencies. By selecting representatives of the community and then opening membership to all interested parties, the building administrator at Perseverance Elementary ensured that all views were represented. Consequently, the STF was able to develop plans that addressed the concerns of all constituencies involved in inclusion.

The STF leadership can either invigorate or stall the progress of an STF. Specific STF leadership qualities described in the literature include organization, drawing out opinions from quiet members, and balancing the need to structure discussions while maintaining enough flexibility to allow open dialogue among professionals (Fullan, 1991; Powell & Hyle, 1997; Rigazio-DiGilio & Beninghof, 1994). In contrast to what is described in the literature, the STF did not have one specific leader. The leadership responsibilities were shared among the members. This flexible leadership was a help as it increased ownership of the reform by all STF members. It was a hindrance as it caused some confusion about who was responsible for ongoing tasks such as setting the agenda and arranging a meeting room. Flexible leadership also affected membership participation.

Member participation affects how individual STF members interact and how comfortable they feel when they participate in collaborative discussions during STF meetings (Gremillion & Cody, 1998; Morley, 1994). Some factors that affect STF members' comfort with each other and, therefore, their participation on the STF include a shared philosophy and dedication to the reform agenda. This study is aligned with the literature in that there was a great deal of participation by all STF members. The members shared a similar philosophy of inclusion and were highly dedicated to the reform effort. In addition to the factors described in the literature, this study found that a main factor contributing to the high level of ownership and participation of all STF members was the lack of one specific leader. Since all members shared the responsibility for the group, and the bulk of the responsibility shifted as the discussion of students moved from teacher to teacher, everyone was involved, shared their ideas, and made recommendations for reform.

Specific activities of an STF greatly impact its success. Four activities in particular have been cited as critical in moving the reform initiative forward. These include setting meeting agendas, reflecting on current practice, assessing the reform process, and creating detailed plans for school change (Morley, 1994). In this study the STF implemented one of these activities, reflecting on current practice. When STF members discussed student and supports currently provided, they began to develop professional relationships. This newfound collaboration enabled them to develop a shared vision of teaching and learning to guide decisions about change. Although in this study the STF did not implement any of the other three activities, it was able to make

considerable progress in 1 year. Perhaps implementation of these activities would have increased the productivity of the STF.

#### Use of Findings to Researchers and Change Facilitators

School reform is difficult. It is important for researchers and change facilitators to share information and work together to enhance our understanding of reform and our ability to achieve it. This study was significant because the STF facilitated reform in a context that initially lacked the conditions believed vital to support change.

Changing educational practice takes a considerable amount of time. Researchers suggest at least 8 or 10 years to change school practice. It is surprising, then, to find evidence of change in a study of the first year of a reform effort. The results of this study suggest that the basic foundation of supports necessary for reform was built and initial changes to practice were planned in less than a year. However, longitudinal study of the change process is necessary to determine the outcomes of this school's reform efforts and the role of the STF in those efforts.

#### Further Research

To have a complete picture of the STF's role in school reform, it is necessary to examine the reform effort over time. A long-term study would help researchers determine if the reform effort and the STF move through stages. They would also be able to assess the efficacy of the STF in each stage. Researchers could determine how the structure and purposes of the STF are maintained or altered over time and the roles it plays in school change.

Another area for research is the STF membership. Membership on the STF is time-consuming and potentially stressful. One can understand why STF members might

choose to withdraw from the committee. However, membership is critical to the success of the reform effort. Researchers could study the consistency of STF membership during long term reform efforts. Does STF membership stay the same over time? Is the level of participation of long term STF members affected? How does STF membership affect the school community member's sense of ownership of the reform initiative? And of course, how do changes in membership affect the reform effort?

Future research should extend what is known about STF leadership, since there is minimal discussion in the current literature compared to that describing school leadership during reform efforts. For example, researchers could study whether and how do different STF/small group leadership structures affect the efficacy of the STF.

Researchers could also examine the relationship between the STF and the larger community. It would be helpful to know how an STF communicates with colleagues and others who are not on the STF. What strategies are used to keep people informed of STF activities? How are recommendations for change disseminated to and implemented in the larger school community? In a community with diverse values and beliefs, how does an STF involved people in discussions about change and move them toward a shared vision?

Finally, researchers interested in inclusion could look closely at the strategies used in an STF to promote inclusion in a setting in which there are conflicting beliefs about teaching students with disabilities. At Perseverance Elementary STF members shared similar beliefs and commitments to these students. What roles might an STF play in a school where there is resistance to inclusion? A longitudinal study could provide insight into effective strategies for consensus building.

### Implications for Change Facilitators

This study provides some insights for change facilitators, especially those in the initial stages of reform. Most importantly, the results of this study suggest that reform is possible even when key supports are not in place. The first step in a reform effort then becomes building the necessary supports within an STF. The study also points out that, change facilitators should assess community members' beliefs about the reform initiative. Because it was a cluster site, the teachers at Perseverance Elementary had previous experience with students with disabilities and strong, mostly positive beliefs about inclusion. One can imagine that in a setting where beliefs are more diverse, change facilitators could face a greater challenge. Insight into beliefs provides important information to the change facilitator and to the members of the community.

APPENDIX A  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

**1. TITLE OF PROJECT:**

A school's response to their district's inclusive education initiative for students with severe disabilities

**2. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S):**

Denise Clark	(Home)
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**3. SUPERVISOR:** Dr. Diane L. Ryndak  
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392-0701 ext. 266

**4. DATES OF PROPOSED PROJECT:** April 1, 2000- June 1, 2001

**5. SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR PROPOSED PROJECT:** None

**6. SCIENTIFIC PURPOSE OF THE INVESTIGATION:**

To discover the effects on one elementary school of the district's new initiative to provide inclusive educational services for students with severe disabilities.

**7. DESCRIBE THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN NON-TECHNICAL LANGUAGE:**

The research methodology will include two main parts, interviews and observations. I will interview a variety of school and district personnel as well as caregivers of students with severe disabilities about the initiative to educate students with severe disabilities in general education classes alongside their same aged peers without disabilities within their home zoned schools and the effects of this initiative. These interviews will occur at the school and district offices, or in the families' homes, and will take less than 90 minutes per interview. Each of the fifteen participants will be interviewed no more than three times. The interviewees will be audio taped, the interview content will be transcribed and

analyzed after the interview. Though the interview questions will progress in a natural conversational way, they will all be related to the following issues:

What do you know about laws that affect the inclusion of students with disabilities?

What do you know about district policy that affects the inclusion of students with disabilities?

What do you know about district policy that affects the inclusion of students with severe disabilities?

How do these laws and policies affect this school?

Where are students with disabilities currently receiving their education at this school?

What does a day look like for a teacher working with a student with severe disabilities?

How is your day impacted by the education of a student with severe disabilities?

How is the school day of a student without disabilities affected by the presence of students with severe disabilities in their class?

What does a day look like for a student with severe disabilities? Is this different from a year ago? How will this change in the next year?

Notes will be taken at district, school, and team meetings of personnel assisting students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings. This district and school have bi-monthly meetings related to the inclusion of students with severe disabilities. The principal investigator will attend and take notes during these meetings. Personnel involved in the actual provision of educational services for students with severe disabilities meet monthly. These meetings will be attended and notes will be taken during these meetings.

## **8. POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND ANTICIPATED RISKS:**

All information from interviews and meetings will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. All interview tapes and notes will be stored in a secured office. Transcriptions will use codes for participants to ensure confidentiality. All reports containing interview and meeting information will use pseudonyms. All tapes will be erased after completion of the project. There will be no risk to the project participants.

## **9. DESCRIBE HOW PARTICIPANTS WILL BE RECRUITED, THE NUMBER AND AGE OF PARTICIPANTS AND PROPOSED COMPENSATION (if any):**

After getting initial consent from district and school administration the investigator will describe the project at a school and a district meeting. The school and district meetings are open to observation and notes are routinely taken at these meetings. The investigator will obtain consent from the meeting facilitators to sit in and to include information from meetings in this study.

Interviewees will be asked to participate and the informed consent form will be discussed with each person individually. Fifteen individuals from the district, school and parents of children will be involved in this project. All participants will be over 21 years of age. The parents, school personnel, and administrators will be chosen from a set of personnel involved with one of the inclusive classrooms. There will be no compensation or other benefits to project participants.

## **10. DESCRIBE THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS.**

After I describe the project at the district and school meetings I will ask individuals to participate in the interviews. For those that agree to participate in the interview I will set up a meeting time to discuss the project, answer their questions and discuss informed consent.

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Principal Investigator

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Supervisor

I approve this protocol for submission to the UFIRB

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Department Chair or Director of Center



## APPENDIX B INTERVIEWS

### Interview 1

Tell me about the school task force  
How did it get started?  
Why did it get started?

Who is on the school task force?  
How was it determined who should be on the school task force?  
Who else should be on it?  
How did you become a member of the school task force?  
Why are you a member?

Who leads the school task force?  
What is the school administrator's role on the school task force?  
How is he involved in the school task force?

What happens at a school task force meeting?  
How is an agenda developed for the school task force meeting?

The school task force meets once per month, is there other school task force business that goes on between meetings? Can you talk about that?

Are there ways school task force members communicate with one another between meetings?

How does the rest of the school community find out about what the school task force is doing?

What is the purpose of the school task force?  
Are there other purposes?  
Who will be served by the work of the school task force?

What could help the school task force accomplish its purpose?  
What could get in the way of the school task force accomplishing its purpose?  
What do you hope the school task force will accomplish?  
What are the chances it will?  
How is it going so far? Why do you think so?

What effect will the school task force have on you?

What effect will the school task force have on your classroom? teachers? students?

Think of a student you work with

What does inclusion mean for this student?

How does this student being included affect what you do each day?

What would the ultimate program for this student look like?

What will this student's life look like in 5 years? in 15?

Who does inclusion help?

Who does inclusion hurt?

Describe how inclusion is happening at Perseverance Elementary.

Does the school task force facilitate inclusion? How?

### Interview 2

What does a typical school task force meeting look like?

How does that compare to the beginning of the year?

How do individual members of the task force participate now?

How does that compare to the beginning of the year?

How do you know when school task force meetings are?

If you miss a school task force meeting, how do you know what happened?

Who is on the school task force?

Has membership changed? Why?

Who leads the school task force?

How effective is their leadership?

What is the school administrator's role on the school task force?

How has his role evolved?

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

At an early age I developed a love for teaching and began volunteering at a state day treatment facility for adults with severe disabilities while in high school. Upon completing high school, I worked as a paraprofessional for Head Start Early Intervention Program. These experiences reinforced my love for teaching and encouraged me to acquire more information about people with disabilities. Since I wanted a broad understanding of the foundations of education and cognitive theories, I enrolled as a dual major in the education and psychology departments at the State University of New York College at Fredonia. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and early childhood education. Throughout my undergraduate years, I continued to pursue experiences involving adults with disabilities. I volunteered at a day treatment facility for adults with severe disabilities and was a recreational therapy aide for adults with severe disabilities and aggressive behaviors on a "locked ward" in a state developmental center. Working in these large segregated facilities made me aware of the dehumanizing effects of grouping people with disabilities together and providing only minimal care and support. I knew I was not fully prepared to meet the challenges presented by the systems of "care" created for individuals with disabilities. I could see that the system was not meeting the needs of people with disabilities, but I could not envision any alternatives. I continued my education to acquire strategies to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. This began a change in my professional vision. I no longer wanted just to

work with people with disabilities; I knew I had to become an advocate for people with disabilities.

After completing my undergraduate work in Fredonia, I continued my education at Buffalo State College where I majored in special education with a concentration in severe disabilities. I began working for a federally funded personnel preparation grant, collecting data on educational interventions and providing technical assistance to teachers in their efforts to include children with disabilities in general education. During this experience, I saw students with disabilities make amazing progress in general education settings. For me, this experience was life-changing. I began to recognize the effect that my work in institutions had on the assumptions I formed about people with disabilities. As I looked at the outcomes for people with disabilities in these different types of systems, the necessity of change was apparent. I graduated from Buffalo with a vision of the system of education and support that should be in place for all people.

After receiving a master's degree from Buffalo State College, I began teaching for Cayuga Onondaga Board of Cooperative Educational Services. I taught for three years in an elementary school. During those years I instructed students with a variety of disabilities ranging from mild mental retardation to severe multiple disabilities. During my second and third years I began to co-teach in fourth and fifth grades so my students could receive a more inclusive education.

My third year teaching at the elementary school was a time of great change. I began to provide respite services in my home for a few children with severe disabilities. Some of the children had severe autism and extreme behavioral challenges. Three of the children had been removed from school-based programs and were being tutored in their

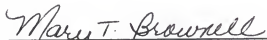
homes. I became involved with these families and was concerned about the lack of services provided to these children and the lack of support available for their families. Concurrently, my elementary special education position was ending as the students I had been supporting transitioned to middle school. One of the program supervisors and I discussed the students for whom I provided respite and developed a plan to bring them back to school. The next year, I taught five students with severe disabilities and extreme behavioral challenges in a middle school setting. As necessary, the program had great support from the families, administration, and general education teachers. This experience validated all of my philosophical beliefs about the possibilities for students with severe disabilities in general education environments and best practice for individuals with disabilities. Unfortunately, as I was working in the middle school, I saw many of the students that I had supported in elementary school were now in segregated programs at the middle school level.

I left the middle school setting after one year to continue my education at the University of Florida. After I left, the five students that had successfully transitioned to integrated middle school programs returned to home tutoring or other more segregated options. I was proud of the progress the students made but was so frustrated by the lack of commitment to inclusive programming at the systemic level. I realized that for students to receive quality inclusive educational programs throughout their school experience there must be a commitment to these values at all levels of the educational system. While pursuing my doctorate at the University of Florida, I maintained my interest in the education of students with severe disabilities but expanded my professional interests to encompass information on school reform. While working on a state-funded


grant to improve systemic supports for inclusive education, I was able to apply the theories of school reform to the daily challenges of schools dealing with issues of reform.

As I complete my doctoral degree, I am working as an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. This position allows me to teach future special and general education teachers and work with districts to reform their systems of support for students with disabilities. In the future, I hope to continue this work and increase the presence of learning environments prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners.


I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
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Mary T. Brownell, Ph.D. Chair  
Associate Professor of Special Education

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
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Elizabeth Bondy, Ph.D. Co-chair  
Professor of Teaching and Learning

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
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Maureen A. Conroy, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Special Education

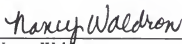
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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Education and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

December 2001



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